NAOMI GODSTONE

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NAOMI GODSTONE

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RICHMAL CROMPTON

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NAOMI GODSTONE

BY

RICHMAL CROMPTON

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TO
THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER

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You went down to the railway bridge just before tea, in time for the four o'clock express.

You stood under the bridge and waited, your heart beating very quickly, and then——

It was like the end of the world. Naomi always thought of the end of the world like that—like the noise of the afternoon express going over the bridge across Tutt's Lane. . . . You hadn't to put your fingers to your ears. If you did that you were a " cowardy custard."

Naomi and Roddy, the Hall children, stood on one side of the archway, and Peter and Vivienne, the Vicarage children, on the other . . . waiting . . .

It came quite suddenly, growing in a few seconds from a faint sound in the distance to a deafening, terrifying, world-shattering roar. There was always one point when you felt that it couldn't possibly grow any louder, and it always did. At the very loudest part you had to make your elbows stiff against your sides, so that you'ld be quite sure of not putting your fingers to your ears.

Roddy held Naomi's hand, and squeezed it so hard that her fingers stuck together of their own accord for a few seconds after he let it go. (An interesting phenomenon.) Vivienne screwed up her comical little face till it was more comical than ever. Peter just blinked. Peter minded it less than the others. But even Peter didn't like it. None of them liked it, though it held an irresistible fascination for them. They never could let

more than one day pass without going down to the bridge for the four o'clock express.

The noise died away, leaving a curious hush behind it.

The four children still lingered under the bridge.

"It was louder than it's ever been to-day," said Roddy.

He spoke in rather a shaky voice, and his hand hovered tentatively for Naomi's again.

"It wasn't," said Peter. "It's always just the same."

Peter wasn't being superior. He was merely stating a fact. Peter was very literal. It worried him when statements weren't quite accurate. He was always correcting Vivienne in his slow, gentle, matter-of-fact voice.

"Vivienne, there weren't hundreds of them. There were only about ten."

"Vivienne, it wasn't a high mountain. It was only quite a little hill."

Vivienne's wilder flights of fancy, her stories of frankly impossible adventures, puzzled him.

"But, Vivienne," he would say, gently remonstrative, "you *couldn't* have."

Secretly, however, he was very proud of her. Slow and unimaginative himself, he admired her quick wit and power of gaminesque mimicry.

Vivienne was thin and tall and eager, reminding you of flickering sunshine, of quivering wires. She had a pale, freckled face, a snub nose, a wide, comical mouth and carroty hair.

It always seemed to the four children a remarkable coincidence that there should be one year's difference between their ages, that they should go up in steps, as it were: Roddy eight, Vivienne nine, Naomi ten and Peter eleven. Roddy seemed younger than eight. He was shy and delicate, with dark-fringed eyes in a pale, oval face. He was ashamed of his delicacy, and resented

fiercely any attempt to shield him from over-exertion. He'd been in a state of terror all day, because they'd arranged to come to the bridge this afternoon, but he always said, when they asked him, that he wasn't afraid.

He hadn't realised that he was holding Naomi's hand till it was over. He felt hilarious with relief now that the train had passed, and was dancing about on one leg.

"It sounds louder than it is," said Peter slowly, "because of the echo."

They all shouted in order to hear the echo, and Vivienne began to sing in a high cracked voice, imitating Miss Polliter, who sang the solos in church because she'd always sung them and no one dared to tell her that her voice was past it. "Oh, for the wings . . . for the wings . . ."

§

They tired suddenly of the bridge, and, running into the lane outside, climbed over the stile, and raced across the field to the river. Vivienne led them, her long legs flying, her plaits streaming in the wind. Roddy was the last, of course, but not very far behind. He sat down panting on the bank. The others were flushed with running, but Roddy was pale, his dark curls plastered damply on his brow. Naomi, watching him, felt a familiar anxiety stir at her heart. Roddy over-tired but trying to keep up with the others. . . .You daren't even let him know that you'd noticed, much less try to help.

"Let's see who can get across the river first," said Vivienne breathlessly, already skinning the long brown stockings from her thin legs.

The river was very shallow at this point, and you could get right across it if you picked your way carefully.

There were big flat gleaming stones in the water that made good footholds, but in between them were deep places with tiny pebbles that pricked and shifted. The most exciting moment was when you were in the very middle, and the water came above your knees.

"You be judge, Roddy," said Naomi. "Stand on the bank and judge who gets across first."

But he saw through her ruse, and his fair skin flushed hotly.

"No," he said shortly. "I'm going to be in the race. You don't want a judge. Anyone can see who gets across first."

"Stand in a line," said Vivienne. "One to be ready, two to be steady, three to be—*off!*"

Vivienne was off first, leaping from stone to stone, losing her balance, saving herself a dozen times by wild contortions of her slim body, sometimes planting her hands on the bottom of the river and standing there like an animated croquet hoop till she suddenly righted herself and leapt on. It was Peter who won, of course, Peter going slowly and stolidly from stone to stone, never moving from one till he was sure of a foothold on the next, utterly absorbed in his progress.

Naomi forgot all about the race as soon as she'd started. She stood watching the colours of the stones through the water . . . red, green, yellow, and yet not quite ordinary red or green or yellow . . . fairy colours. The water too . . . not green and not white and not blue . . . not any colour. And the reflections . . . walking through the sky and tree-tops . . . like magic. . . . She reached the middle of the stream and stood there, poising herself against the sudden, unexpected current. It was magic, too, that water should be strong like that, water that was so weak that it ran through your fingers and you could throw it about. Strong . . .

pushing against you . . . trying to knock you over . . . like a person fighting against you. . . .

" I've got across," called Peter from the farther bank. There wasn't any triumph in his tone. Again, he was merely stating a fact.

" Oh, I nearly won ! I nearly won ! " panted Vivienne, flinging her dripping person wildly from one insecure foothold to another.

Naomi awoke slowly from her dreams to look round for Roddy. He was standing on a stone near the middle, balancing precariously. He couldn't go backward or forward. His face looked startlingly white, and his dark curls glistened on his forehead. Naomi hesitated, knowing how fiercely he would resent any offer of help from her even in his extremity. But Peter had seen, and was carefully picking his way back over the stones, seeming, because of his carefulness, to come so slowly, but in reality moving more quickly than any of them.

He held out a hand to Roddy as he passed.

" Like a hand ? " he said casually as if he hadn't come back on purpose to help him. Peter, for all his slowness, understood Roddy.

Roddy flushed with relief and pleasure. He was proud to accept help from Peter. Peter was in his eyes a sort of demi-god.

Naomi, no longer worried about Roddy, was trailing through the water behind them, engrossed by the colour of her legs . . . white above the water and then the fairy colour that was green and white and blue and yet that wasn't any of them. . . . She was wearing fairy stockings. Then she looked up at the other three children who had now reached the bank, and she seemed slowly to recede from them till they were mere dots. She was up somewhere in the sky, gazing down at the world. It was covered with tiny, tiny dots that were

people scurrying about like ants. It was thrilling. Then suddenly it was terrifying, and she threw herself out of the sky on to the world again, and they grew to their proper size—people, not ants any longer.

"Oh, come *on*, Naomi," called Vivienne impatiently from the bank where they were all sitting, drying their feet in the sun.

Naomi scrambled out and joined them, lying on her back and spreading out her wet legs.

"Dry them, sun," she commanded haughtily, and to the others, "The sun's my slave. He does anything I tell him."

"Tell him to freeze the river, then," challenged Roddy.

"No, I don't want him to," she said, then, her eyes fixed on the stream, "What colour *is* water?"

"It isn't any colour," said Vivienne. "I kept slipping or else I'd have been across before Peter."

Roddy, too, lay stretched out in the sun. His cheeks were brightly flushed now. Naomi hoped that he hadn't got a temperature. He was always getting temperatures and then they blamed her. But she couldn't feel really worried about it. Just at first she wondered why she couldn't feel really worried about it. And then she remembered. She was going to spend two days at the Vicarage with Vivienne. She'd never done that before.

§

All to-day it had been a sort of shining background in her mind even when she wasn't thinking about it, making the railway bridge and the river and everything that happened more thrilling than they would have been otherwise. It was funny, she thought, that you could feel happy about something, and yet forget what you were feeling happy about.

"I wish we lived in the days when they thought that the sun and the trees and the rivers were people," Vivienne was saying; "it would have been much more exciting."

Peter was lying on his stomach, intent upon watching a ladybird climbing a blade of grass.

"He keeps falling and starting again," he said. "I wonder why he's so keen to get to the top. You're too heavy for it, old chap."

Vivienne sat up suddenly and tossed back her damp plaits.

"We're dry," she said. "Nearly dry, anyway. I'm so hungry. Let's go home for tea."

"We'll go behind the hedge," said Naomi, "because of Lily."

Lily Birch lived at a house on the main road that was called The Larches (quite inexplicably, because no larches grew there), and she spent most of her time at the window that overlooked the main road, watching for the four children to pass. As soon as she saw them, she would run down to the road and call out, "Where are you going? Wait for me. I want to come too." They all disliked her intensely, for no particular reason but that she was fat and pale and plaintive and unwearied in her pursuit of them. Sometimes her mother (who was a larger, fatter, paler edition of Lily) would ask them to tea and they would have to go. They hated going to tea with Lily. She made them play with her dolls' house. They disliked dolls' houses of any sort, but Lily's in particular. Lily had made a toy birdcage by joining two small circular pieces of cardboard with pins, so that one piece of cardboard formed the roof, the other the floor, and the pins the bars. She kept this hanging at the drawing-room window of her dolls' house with a fly inside for a bird. She said that it wasn't cruel, because

she always let the fly out at night and caught a fresh one in the morning. Lily's mother said that it was a " very pretty idea."

They always passed Lily's house in single file, crouching behind the hedge in the field that bordered the road, so that she shouldn't see them. In order to make it more exciting, they used to pretend that they were spies crossing the enemy's lines, and that Lily was a sentry who would shoot them if she saw them.

Lily wasn't watching at the window to-day, so the game wasn't as exciting as it was sometimes, though it was still quite real to Vivienne and Naomi. It was real to Roddy only when they could see Lily's pale fat face at the window through the hedge. It was never real to Peter at all, though he tried hard to make it real.

§

Roddy fell behind when they joined the main road, occasionally stopping to pick up a stone and throw it into the hedge. He did this, not because it gave him any pleasure, but in order that he might seem to be occupied and so escape the notice of the others. He didn't want them to think that he was lagging behind because he was tired or unhappy. In reality he was both. Already that feeling of acute physical discomfort that he recognised as a " temperture " had come upon him. He resented it passionately, and was willing to assert upon his most solemn oath that he felt perfectly well. For worse than the physical discomfort was the secret shame it brought to him. The others didn't get " tempertures," didn't feel like this after an ordinary afternoon's play. He was as ashamed of it as if it had been a crime. He would stoop to any tricks to conceal it, as now he whistled and swaggered and threw stones into the hedge.

Naomi turned round and gave him a quick anxious look. Naomi suspected. . . . He exaggerated his swagger and raised his thin, childish voice untunefully: "A fox went out one wintry night . . ."

Naomi . . . that was really why he was unhappy. Not because he was tired and feverish, and ashamed of being tired and feverish. Naomi was going away for two days . . . two whole long days. She'ld only be at the Vicarage, of course, a few yards away, but to Roddy it would be as bad as if she were at the other end of the world. He missed her almost more than he could bear when she went back to school. He wrote laborious little letters to her every week, beginning "Dere Namy."

Everyone in Roddy's world—even Peter—was shadowy and unreal compared with Naomi. He had adored her from babyhood. She belonged to his world—the world of childhood—and yet there hung about her something of the omnipotence and infallibility that belongs to the grown-up world. She was mysterious . . . quick, passionate, incalculable, wrapped sometimes in a sullenness that was like a thick fog, and at other times as bright and warm as sunlight. She had sudden flaming passions in which she was utterly reckless of consequences. But Roddy wasn't frightened of her even then. Her anger never flared out at him, though it had flared out often enough on his behalf. He loved her far more than he loved Mother. He hardly considered Mother as a personality at all. She was an institution. He took her for granted as unquestioningly as he took the nursery furniture for granted.

The three in front had reached the Hall gate now, and had turned to wait for him.

"Good-bye, Roddy darling," said Naomi; "it's only till Monday, you know. It'll go very quickly. . . ."

"Yes, I know. . . . Good-bye."

He spoke loudly and defiantly, defying his own unhappiness, then turned in at the gate of the Hall. He walked with his elaborate swagger till he was out of their sight. Then he seemed to shrink to less than his normal size as he trailed disconsolately up the winding drive. He realised that, together with the hot dry sensation of the "temperture," he was feeling rather sick, and the noise of the express train under the bridge had given him a headache. He hated noise. . . .

NAOMI GODSTONE · CHAPTER II

THE Hall and the Vicarage were separated by the churchyard.

The back of the Hall, where the kitchens and maids' bedrooms were, looked straight down upon the churchyard. The Vicarage was more discreetly screened, being shut off from the churchyard by a belt of trees. From the landing window of the Hall you could see a tiny patch of the Vicarage lawn through a gap in the trees, and the four children had devised a complicated system of signals. Naomi and Roddy would stand on the landing window and Vivienne and Peter on the Vicarage lawn, and they would wave pieces of coloured material taken from the Vicarage rag-bag. Various combinations of colours represented various messages. They considered the system infinitely superior to the Morse code.

Naomi's heart danced with excitement as she walked with Vivienne towards the Vicarage. It was so thrilling to pass the gate of her own home like this, and go on to someone else's, not just to tea or for the day, but to spend two nights. In at the wide wooden Vicarage gate that

hadn't been shut for years because it had sagged on its hinges and embedded itself deeply in the mossy drive, then on into the dark tunnel of shade, heavy with the aromatic scent of yew trees, and out into the patch of sunshine just in front of the Vicarage porch. The front door was level with the drive, and on either side the porch were deep bay windows reaching to the ground. The drive was pear-shaped in front of the house, just allowing room for a carriage to turn in it, and beyond that was a rather raggy lawn, the larger part of it under the shade of a copper beech, and beyond that the orchard and the kitchen garden.

The kitchen garden was separated from the lawn and the orchard by a yew hedge, and was framed inside by a herbaceous border and a moss-grown brick path. Madonna lilies and damask roses grew surprisingly among the vegetables, and there was a little herb garden with rosemary and lavender and thyme and marjoram in it, as well as plants that made you think of the Bible, like myrrh and cumin, and plants with names that rolled deliciously off your tongue, like elecampane and alecost.

On the farther side—the side opposite the yew hedge —was an old brick wall against which grew pears and peaches.

Naomi knew and loved every inch of the kitchen garden. She loved the red of the old wall and the tiny ferns that grew in the crevices, loved the sheen of the moss on the brick paths and the heavy scent of yews that hung over everything.

The Hall garden was formal and trim. It wasn't friendly like the Vicarage garden. And Blake, the Hall gardener, was morose and short-tempered. The Vicar himself tended the Vicarage garden in his odd minutes. You would see him sometimes pulling the heavy roller

across the raggy lawn in the rain, a bowed but indomitably cheerful figure.

Naomi lingered in the sunshine at the front door, looking towards the garden.

"We'll go there after tea," said Vivienne. "Let's go in now. I want to see if Tinker's all right."

There was mingled anxiety and delight on Vivienne's sharp little face. Tinker was Vivienne's puppy, and she adored him from his eager inquisitive nose to his ridiculous miniature tail. She didn't take him with her when she went out with the others because Tinker hadn't as yet any idea of following his mistress along a road. Tinker found the hedges and ditches, with their mixtures of smells, too entrancing to be passed by. When you were out with Vivienne and Tinker, Vivienne was always suddenly darting back to unearth Tinker from the hedge or the ditch. He went wild when he found a hole, and he would always bring to her anything of interest that he came across in his investigations, such as a bird's nest or an old boot. If he was out by himself, he would bring them home to her, and he had once appeared at a tea-party in the Vicarage drawing-room dragging a dead cat laboriously behind him—a present for Vivienne. But there was a darker side to Tinker's character. He was "destructive." He couldn't understand that you could tear holes in hedges and ditches and not in the drawing-room cushions. He was always sorry when he realised that he had done wrong, but he couldn't understand it. When he dismembered a tramp's sock that he found by the roadside with the children, he was hilariously applauded. When he did the same to one of the Vicar's socks he was ostracised and disgraced. Tinker, though full to overflowing of the joy of life, was beginning nevertheless to realise that life was a bit queer.

"You know, darling," Vivienne's mother had said,

" we really can't keep him if he's going to be as destructive as all this. The drawing-room cushions are ruined and we shall have to get a new rug for the hall now that he's bitten all the middle out. We simply can't afford it. "

And so Vivienne spent most of her time furtively concealing the traces of Tinker's misdoings, straightening things that he had disarranged, mending things that he had torn, and making crimes that were unconcealable look a little less glaring than they really were. Yesterday she'd carefully arranged the drawing-room waste-paper basket in its corner by the writing-desk, so that the piece he'd bitten out of it didn't show, but of course that only postponed the discovery, because the room would be " done out " on Tuesday.

§

An elderly maid in a black dress that covered her ankles, with white cap and voluminous white apron, opened the kitchen door as the little girls entered the hall.

" Your ma's not in yet," she said brusquely, " and that dog's all over the place."

Jane always referred to Tinker as " that dog." She disapproved of youth in both humans and animals.

She had disappeared, shutting the kitchen door with a bang as soon as she'd spoken. The anxiety on Vivienne's face deepened.

" I hope he hasn't——" she began, then the anxiety changed to a radiant tenderness as Tinker came tumbling head over heels downstairs, a tornado of ecstatic joy at their reunion. He leapt up at her, rolled over at her feet and licked her shoes, uttering excited yelps. Tinker's emotions were always so intense that it seemed hardly possible for his tiny body to contain them.

Vivienne picked him up, kissed his nose, then turned to that hasty tour of inspection that Tinker's presence in the house, unguarded by Vivienne, always necessitated. He'd obviously been in Vivienne's mother's bedroom. The eiderdown was on the floor, and the shoes that had formed a neat row under the dressing-table lay in a heap on the hearth-rug. No real damage had been done, however.

" Jane's so mean," said Vivienne breathlessly, as she put the room to rights. " She never stops him when she's left with him. She hopes that he'll do something awful and that they'll get rid of him. She hates him."

" Why ? "

" Oh, just because he's a dog. As if he could help it ! "

The only real damage was in the dining-room, where he had pulled the window-seat cushion down, and torn the underside of it, releasing some of the stuffing. Vivienne put back the stuffing, and drew the tear together firmly if inelegantly with cotton.

" They *might* not find out," she said hopefully. " They might not just happen to notice the underneath of it for months."

Tinker was watching her proceedings with a proprietary interest and a tentative pride. He wasn't *quite* sure, but he thought he'd done some rather clever things that afternoon. . . .

There came the sudden sound of the opening of the front door, and Vivienne's mother's voice, eager, rather breathless, as it generally was, " Children ? "

They ran into the hall, where Mrs. Darrent was laying an armful of parcels on the chest. She turned to Naomi with a welcoming smile.

" Darling, how *nice* to have you ! Your bag came over

this morning. I've unpacked your things. You're sleeping with Vivienne, you know."

Mrs. Darrent was short and plump and eager and very pretty, with brown wavy hair and soft bright brown eyes. Although she was grown-up and Vivienne's mother, she sometimes seemed to Naomi to be the youngest of them all. She enjoyed things so tremendously. She looked forward to the little treats she arranged for them—picnics, parties, visits—just as if she, too, were a child with them. Sometimes, even when she was only going to try a new pudding from her cookery book, she was so much excited that she could hardly sleep at all the night before.

Underlying her ordinary relations with Vivienne was another relationship—an inverted relationship as it were—in which she was the younger and Vivienne the elder. And yet, despite her childishness, there was a radiant motherliness about her. She was the sort of person who could cuddle you without making you feel silly.

"Have you had a nice afternoon, darling?" she said. "Have you taken Naomi to get ready for tea, Vivienne? Where's Peter? Has Tinker been good?"

"Peter's in the garden somewhere," said Vivienne, diplomatically ignoring the question about Tinker, "and I'm just going to take Naomi upstairs."

"That's right. Tea in ten minutes, you know."

Mrs. Darrent smiled at them again, gathered up her parcels and disappeared into the kitchen.

Vivienne's bedroom was at the back of the house just over the sloping roof of the scullery. Peter could swing himself up on to the scullery roof and climb up to Vivienne's window easily. He often did it when they were playing "Hide and Seek." The curtains were of white muslin tied back with blue ribbons, the little

dressing-table was hung with white flounced muslin, and the bed had a white and blue counterpane.

A framed text, " God is Love," hung over the bed, a wall map of England and Wales opposite the bed, and over the mantelpiece was a group of Vivienne's father's family with Vivienne's father, a little boy of eight in a velvet suit with tight trousers coming below his knees, among a host of brothers and sisters.

That was an object of never-ending interest to Naomi. She always went up to the mantelpiece as soon as she entered the bedroom, to look at Vivienne's father leaning against his mother's knee, dressed in a velvet suit. To-day, however, the glance she gave him was only cursory. Everything was so exciting that the picture of Vivienne's father in his velvet suit was only a very small part of it. Her brush and comb bag was on the dressing-table next to Vivienne's, her nightdress case was next to Vivienne's on the white bed, her dressing-gown hung with Vivienne's behind the door. She could hardly believe that she was really going to sleep with Vivienne, to awake and find the trees of the Vicarage garden looking at her through the window instead of the trees of the Hall garden. . . . How surprised they'ld be! She laughed softly to herself.

" What's the matter ? " said Vivienne.

" It's all such fun," said Naomi.

They could hear Peter in the bathroom next door, splashing noisily as he washed.

They went in to him and sat on the large flat edge of the old-fashioned wooden bath case, waiting for him to finish.

Bending over the hand-basin, he turned a soapy face to them, said, " Won't be a minute," and went on splashing.

The whole of the Vicarage was shabby, but the

bathroom was the shabbiest room of all. There is something starkly honest about a bathroom. You can't titivate it with white muslin hangings and blue ribbons and cushions of bright cheap material. The enamel of the bath and the paint of the surrounding wooden case had in many places entirely disappeared. The paper—a glazed paper with a tiled pattern—bulged from the wall in a rather peculiar fashion, and gaped at the seams. The Vicar had papered it five years ago, and he admitted himself that it had never been a real success. A large part of it, however, was covered by a wall map of Europe. The Vicar had a passion for maps and a great belief in their educational value. A wall map of Ancient Italy hung in Peter's bedroom.

"I love Spain and Portugal," said Naomi dreamily, drumming her heels against the wooden sides of the bath. "He looks just like an Esquimo with a fur cap and a very red face."

"I like Italy and Sicily better," said Vivienne. "It's like a leg with a high heel just going to kick a football."

Peter had finished washing, and was scrubbing his face with a towel.

"You can wash next," said Vivienne to Naomi, and added, "What shall we do after tea?"

"I've got to clean out the rabbits," said Peter.

"Oh, don't let's do anything particular," said Naomi. "Things are always nicer if you just let them happen."

§

Mrs. Darrent was in the dining-room when they entered. She watched them with a little smile, waiting for them to notice her "surprise treat" in honour of Naomi's visit—a honeycomb and some chocolate biscuits. Vivienne's mother loved to get "surprise treats"—

something that you hadn't expected. She bought them in secret and then watched you, shining, smiling, quivering with excitement, like this, till you noticed. But a honeycomb really *was* something rather magnificent. The Vicarage didn't often run to honeycombs.

It made tea a festive celebration. Naomi felt important and very, very happy. Sometimes she thought of Roddy and wondered if he were missing her (he'd been so good about her coming), and then a pang shot through her heart and her excitement suddenly faded, but it was gone almost at once, because everything was so jolly that she couldn't help feeling jolly too. They made Tinker sit up for a piece of the honeycomb, and laughed at his expression of surprise when he tasted it. Tinker was very funny when he sat up, because he always ended by over-balancing backwards.

When they had cleared away the tea-things, Vivienne and Naomi went out to watch Peter clean the rabbit hutches that stood in a neat row in the old stables. Peter took his rabbits very seriously, and kept a log book in which he recorded their births, deaths, illnesses, and general characteristics. Naomi loved to watch him cut their claws. He did it very gently and carefully, wholly absorbed in the task as he was in anything he did. The rabbits weren't a bit frightened when he did it, though if someone else tried to do it they went mad. Tinker was standing on his hind legs, his front paws against the hutches, watching Peter clean them out. Tinker loved Peter's rabbits, and the deepest sorrow of his life was their refusal to make friends with him.

Next to the rabbit hutch in the corner of the stable, was Peter's carpentering bench and tools—everything in spick and span order. Despite his slowness, Peter wasn't clumsy, and he had already made many neat, serviceable things for the Vicarage.

Vivienne suddenly discovered that Tinker had left them, and went to find him. Naomi lingered for a minute or two with Peter, but Peter was so intent on his work that he hardly realised that she was there, and he certainly didn't want her help—Peter hated to be helped—so she slipped away to the kitchen garden.

She loved the mingled scent of phlox and yew and roses that lingered in it, shut in by the wall and high hedge. She went from the phloxes to the roses, burying her face in each and drawing the scent of it, as it seemed, into her small solid body. She worshipped growing things with a strange secret ecstasy that was incomprehensible even to herself, loved even the very ground they grew from. She'd never told any of the other three how she felt about that, because they wouldn't have understood. Even Vivienne, who understood so quickly, wouldn't have understood that. Sometimes a sudden breathless hatred of the shut-in-ness of house and garden came upon her, and she had to get away from it at once . . . running up on to the downs running and running with nothing above her but the sky, till she dropped exhausted on to the ground. She felt in some strange way part of it all, as if she *were* the earth and the sun and the wind. . . . She was often punished for it, because no one understood why she should "run off" like that, and she never even attempted to explain. She accepted it quite simply as "naughtiness," and took her punishments with equanimity, but she knew that it was something beyond her control and that, when the summons came again, she'ld go again. Once she had fought Mother like a little wild cat when Mother had tried to stop her going . . . had forced her way past her and run off panting, crying, trembling, to the downs, because she had to . . . *had* to . . .

Vivienne's voice cut through the sleepy summer air.

"Put on your hat, Naomi, and come down to the village. We'll take Tinker."

Naomi went slowly back to the house. Mrs. Darrent stood at the door, wearing an apron, her sleeves rolled up, smiling.

"I want you to get me some yeast, darlings, if you're going to the village. I must bake to-morrow."

"We're going to the village, Peter," called Vivienne; "d'you want to come?"

Peter's slow, preoccupied voice from the stables: "No, thanks."

§

They ran down the drive under the tunnel of yew trees to the ramshackle gate, with Tinker barking loudly at their heels, then down the sleepy country road to the shop. It was always called "the shop" because it was the only one in the village. It sold everything from bacon to handkerchiefs, and was the post office as well. In one corner of the window was an assortment of tiny objects in white metal—lanterns, candlesticks, jugs, cups, and even animals—priced twopence each. They had been there for several years, but the two little girls had lately begun to "collect" them. They bought one every week. To-day Naomi bought a crocodile and Vivienne a tiny sofa.

"I got the crocodile last week," said Vivienne. "Aren't they *lovely*! When we've got all the sorts you've got, you *will* get some fresh ones, won't you, Mrs. Brewster?"

"I'll try to, miss."

"It would be *dreadful* not to be able to get any more," said Naomi, as they went out again into the sunny road.

They couldn't have told why it would be dreadful but

they knew that it would. They kept them in cardboard boxes with the words " Treasures. Private " carefully, if unevenly, printed outside, and they took them out to look at them and rearrange them several times a day.

When they came out of the shop they began to run down the road, Tinker leaping by the side of them. Naomi left Vivienne and Tinker far behind (Vivienne had to stop to get Tinker out of the ditch), and, when no breath was left in her, lay down on the bank by the roadside panting, with closed eyes, to wait for Vivienne.

Tinker, covered with bits of sticks and leaves from squeezing his way through inadequate holes in the hedge, leapt upon her in tumultuous greeting, quite forgetting that he had seen her only two minutes ago. Then Vivienne came up, and the two little girls lay together on the grass by the roadside, their faces hidden in the grass to avoid Tinker's licks, laughing as he nuzzled their necks.

§

There came the short, sharp cloppety-clop of a horse's hooves, and the butcher's dogcart swung into view. Charlie, the butcher's man, was driving it. He was short and rubicund, with blue puckered eyes, and lips that were generally pursed in a whistle. The butcher's horse, Jimmie, was the one love of his life. The little girls were favourites of his, and he stopped and grinned down at them.

" Like a lift ? " he said.

They jumped up eagerly—Vivienne with Tinker in her arms in front, and Naomi behind—and the little dogcart set off again down the road towards the village.

" Like to watch Jimmie have his glass ? " he said when they reached the Barley Mow.

Jimmie, in fact, was pulling up of his own accord and turning his head expectantly.

The barmaid appeared at once with two glasses, one for Jimmie and one for Charlie, who had jumped down from his seat. The sight of Jimmie " having his glass " was a popular one, and several farm labourers came out of the bar to watch it. Charlie held the glass to Jimmie's mouth, and Jimmie immediately drew up the beer with every appearance of relish till not a drop remained.

" Have 'is glass with anyone, 'e will," said Charlie proudly as he took his own glass from the barmaid, " as yuman as you or me."

The little girls looked on with delight, though they had seen the sight often before. In fact, probably the only person in the village who had not seen the sight was Jimmie's master and Charlie's employer, the butcher, who was the pillar of the Wesleyan chapel and a rabid teetotaler.

§

There was cocoa and bread and honey and cake for supper. The little girls were only just in time for it. They had stayed to watch Jimmie being unharnessed and fed. Naomi felt miles and miles away from Mother and Roddy. It was like being in another world. . . . Vivienne's mother was arranging a picnic for to-morrow.

" We'll make sandwiches and walk across the woods to Brunfield and have tea there . . . "

Her brown eyes were bright with excitement.

" I ought to bake first," she said. " I'll start baking directly after breakfast. And I *must* be back for the Sunday School Teachers' Class in the evening, but it will give us quite a nice long day . . . "

The Vicar entered suddenly. He was a tall stooping

man with a weather-beaten face and a shrewd, humorous mouth. But Naomi knew that it wasn't his mouth that showed the real part of him. It was his eyes—bright, blue eyes that seemed to see beyond you to things you couldn't see. He was pleasant and kindly and he made little jokes to them, but Naomi always felt that the self he showed you was a sort of screen to hide his real self. Only when he looked at Vivienne's mother did the two selves seem to meet.

He sank into an armchair by the fire, smiling at Naomi and teasing her gently. He had a little store of private jokes with each of the children on which he based his conversation with them.

He looked tired, but then he generally looked tired. He had charge of a mission church five miles away as well as the village church, and he walked to and fro in all weathers. His two chief relaxations were walking and study. Large volumes—works chiefly of the Early Fathers—lay piled upon his desk, and he had lately begun to learn Hebrew.

"I've made another rabbit hutch," said Peter.

"There'll be a famine of wood in this district if you go on at this rate," said the Vicar. "Why always rabbit hutches? Why don't you start on something else? Make a grand piano for Naomi."

"I'm making a bracket for Naomi," said Peter in his slow, serious voice. (Peter seldom saw a joke.) "I haven't got the set of tools you need for making pianos."

"Hello, Tinker, Tinker, Tinker," said the Vicar as Tinker came in. "Come along, Tinker. Come along, little man."

He put out an arm from his chair and played with Tinker gently, rolling him over and pretending to fight him.

THEY couldn't start for the picnic till nearly lunch-time because Vivienne's mother was so busy in the kitchen. She was bustling about, singing to herself, dressed in a long overall, her sleeves rolled up above her elbows. The little girls wanted to help, but she told them that they'ld only get in the way and shoo'd them out. Vivienne was carrying Tinker in her arms, determined not to let him out of her sight for a second, so that he couldn't spoil the day by doing anything terrible before the picnic started.

The Vicar was at home that morning—a rare thing for him—because it was the morning of his Hebrew lesson. A Jewish Rabbi was coming from Lainsforth. It was the first time that the Rabbi had been to the Vicarage. Generally the Vicar went into Lainsforth for his lesson, but to-day he had a funeral at eleven and wouldn't have had time to go to Lainsforth and back, so the Rabbi was coming to the Vicarage.

The two little girls went into the study to watch for him.

The study was a small book-lined room with a deep cushioned window-seat, on which Vivienne knelt holding Tinker and watching the yew-shadowed drive where the figure of the Rabbi should appear. A faint perfume of old leather mixed with roses hung about the room. It was a perfume that Naomi connected all her life with the Vicar's study.

Naomi was standing by the desk. Sheets full of beautifully formed characters lay outspread on it, ready for the lesson. She bent over them fascinated. Mysterious signs . . . magic lands to which she hadn't the right of entry . . . rooms, full of treasure, to which she hadn't the key. And her own writing, the ordinary

Sunday letters she wrote from school, would be as mysterious as this to people who lived in foreign countries . . . but not as beautiful. The Vicar's ordinary handwriting in English was beautiful . . . even-flowing lines, letters meticulously formed . . . copper plate. He regretted the lost art of handwriting.

He entered now, looking at his watch.

" Oh, do let us see you writing it," pleaded Naomi.

He put his hand on Vivienne's shoulder, and smiled at Naomi over her head.

" This young woman's report came this morning," he said, " and she's done splendidly. She's the youngest in her form and she's top of it again. I'm very, very proud of her."

Naomi saw Vivienne stiffen and her small face harden as she slipped away from her father's hand. It had glowed as if with pleasure when first he laid it on her shoulder.

" Do write some Hebrew for Naomi," was all she said.

He sat down at the writing-table and wrote a few Hebrew characters slowly, delicately, on the back of an envelope. They were so graceful that they seemed almost alive.

Naomi hung over his shoulder entranced.

" Tell us what they mean," she pleaded.

But Vivienne said, " He's coming," and Naomi leapt to the window, to see an old man in a skull cap and a long gabardine, coming with slow dignity up the drive, through the yew tunnel and out into the sunshine at the front door.

They scuttled into the hall and then into the garden by the side door, suddenly terrified of meeting him face to face. Naomi's heart was racing with delight.

" I've seen a Jewish Rabbi," she was saying to herself, " I've seen a Jewish Rabbi."

§

The haze of a late summer morning hung over the garden. Thick grey gossamer lay upon flowers and grass and hedges. It was the sort of morning on which the little girls used to say that the fairies were hanging up their lace curtains to dry. They said it again now (though, of course, they didn't believe in fairies any longer), as they got out the old garden wheelbarrow that figured in all their games. Then they collected berries (yew berries, hawthorn berries, juniper berries and barberry berries) and arranged them in little piles in the wheelbarrow ready for playing " shop "—a game that of itself was foolish and childish, but that Vivienne, in a lightning succession of " quick change " customers of every class and kind, could make the most exciting game that they ever played.

There was a hard bright gaiety about Vivienne that somehow made Naomi think of the moment she had withdrawn from the Vicar's hand with a sudden tightening of her lips. Naomi spoke tentatively, because for all Vivienne's high spirit you never got really near her.

" Vivienne, do you mind your father being proud of you ? "

Vivienne was silent for so long that Naomi thought she wasn't going to answer, then suddenly she burst out :

" It's not *me* he's proud of. It's nothing to do with me, the real me. The part you do lessons with, isn't *you*. And he's so proud of that part of me that it's the only part he sees. Whenever he sees me he doesn't think of *me*, he thinks of the part of me that came out top and is going to have a double remove. I'm only that to him. I'm not a *person* at all." Then her passion faded and she said stonily, " It's a punishment for me

because I'm wicked. I love him more than God and I don't care. I don't *want* to love God best."

Naomi was silent, aghast. She'd never known that Vivienne felt like this. But before she had found words to show her sympathy Vivienne had leapt into her first " customer " character.

She struck a haughty attitude in front of " the shop " and said in a high-pitched affected voice :

" Ah, what have you heah in the way of ah—cucumbahs, my good woman ? "

§

The picnic was thrilling. . . . Lying on the sun-swept downs with Tinker licking your face . . . listening to Peter talking about the birds and butterflies that he watched and studied with such unwearying patience . . . playing games that Vivienne invented on the spot and that were so much more exciting than ordinary games . . . tea at the farmhouse—cream and jam and new bread and butter and a big treacle cake. . . .

The evening . . . sitting round the lamp-lit study reading *The Tempest*, taking parts. They always read Shakespeare plays at the Vicarage on Saturday evenings. It was the Vicar's weekly relaxation and he looked forward to it all week. Vivienne claimed Caliban and read it so that you had to keep looking at her to be sure that it *was* Vivienne, not the hairy uncouth monster of the words and voice. Peter read loudly and slowly and unstumblingly, but without any expression at all.

Then Family Prayers—a novel and intriguing ceremony that they didn't have at the Hall. It was thrilling to kneel at a chair next to Jane and listen to her creaky breathing, to steal half-frightened glances at Vivienne's

father's face, upturned, shining somehow, though he knelt in the shadow.

She undressed sleepily with Vivienne in the little white and blue bedroom. Once Vivienne said, "Are you going to marry when you grow up, Naomi?"

Naomi considered the question seriously for the first time before she answered, "I don't think so. I don't think I shall ever love anyone as much as I love Roddy. I'd rather not marry, and live with Roddy."

Then they said "Good night," and she lay in bed gazing at the map of England and Wales. She grew sleepier and sleepier. . . . The Isle of Man turned into a pug dog. . . .

§

And the next day everything was different. All the glamour of the visit seemed suddenly to be centred in her home-coming.

She awoke very early and the luxurious melancholy of home-sickness stole over her. The visit was almost over. She was going home. She thought of Mother . . . Roddy. . . . She hoped passionately that they were thinking of her . . . missing her. She thought of Mother, not by the name of Mother, but by her own name of Imogen. She wasn't one of the mothers who suggest Mother. She suggested herself . . . Imogen.

Then she fell into a half-sleep and dreamed of Imogen —Imogen and yet mysteriously Vivienne's mother too— coming forward with outstretched arms and saying, "How nice to have you back, darling. We've missed you so much." The voice was Imogen's voice, cool, aloof, and yet it was Vivienne's mother's voice too, loving and eager.

She was drawn into the outstretched arms. The

face above her was Imogen's, beautiful, weary, but the arms and the soft warm bosom were Vivienne's mother's.

Hugging her dream to her, she fell asleep again.

§

They were in church in time to see Miss Foot the organist take her place at the organ. Miss Foot dressed always in white—white serge in winter, white muslin in summer—because her parents had given her the name of Blanche. The result was the more unfortunate as Miss Foot was very stout and made her own dresses, bringing to bear upon the process the same energy and lack of skill that she brought to bear upon her organ playing. The elaborate trimmings seemed to represent the trills and flourishes that she could not resist introducing into every line of every hymn, and their painful failure to accommodate themselves to the lines of her figure seemed to represent the discords and faults of time in which her playing abounded. She looked somehow like a huge wedding cake, as she walked across the chancel from the vestry to the organ, and the little girls always felt that the whole service was spoilt, if they didn't arrive in time to watch her do it.

All through the service Naomi kept half turning round to see if Imogen and Roddy were there. If Imogen went to church, she always sat in the back pew, and there were so many people there that Naomi couldn't see the back pew. When she had turned round several times, she remembered that it was wrong to turn round in church, and so she fixed her eyes upon Mrs. Bowler's back just in front of her. It was huge and mountainous and balloon-like, with a sharply defined ridge that marked the top of her corsets. She kept thinking of her dream and hearing the

voice of the dream-Imogen saying, " How nice to have you back, darling. We've missed you so much."

As they stood up for the hymn, she turned round again. But still she couldn't see the back of the church. Two rows of young men sat half-way down the church and blocked her view. She often heard people say that the Vicar was " good with " young men.

She didn't listen to the sermon. Instead she leant against the back of the pew and let her mind wander over the events of the week-end . . . the river, Tinker, the Jewish Rabbi, Peter and his rabbit hutches, Jimmie " having his glass," the picnic, Vivienne reading Caliban, Vivienne the haughty customer, Vivienne saying that she was jealous of her lesson part, the Isle of Man turning into a pug dog. . . . She was growing sleepy. She roused herself and began to watch her little man. He was up on the roof clambering about the beams, swinging hand over hand along the iron bars that spanned the church. She'd had her little man ever since she could remember. He always did things like that to amuse her when she was bored or tired. When Miss Meredith, the very cross mistress at school, was scolding her, he used to dance about all over the desks for her, swing on to the window cords, and climb up the buttons of Miss Meredith's boots.

§

The Vicar teased them both gently during lunch. He made up a limerick about Tinker beginning :

> There was a young mongrel named Tinker
> Who wasn't a very deep thinker.

Naomi laughed, but she wasn't really there at all. She was still living in the moment of her home-coming.

"Timothy, darling," Vivienne's mother was saying, "we *must* have something done to the place next spring. The papers are in a dreadful state and the ceilings are black."

The Vicar was silent for a minute.

"If I do the study and the bathroom——" he began.

"It's such hard work," she murmured.

"It isn't. I enjoy it. I'll borrow some overalls again. And I ought to be able to get it straighter this time. Last time was after all in the nature of an experiment."

"It *does* cost a lot, I know," she murmured. "But we shall have to have it done sooner or later."

"I wonder if I ought to go on having those Hebrew lessons," said the Vicar thoughtfully.

"Oh, darling, of *course* you must. You spend hardly any money on yourself. Your overcoat's simply green."

"I like it green. Green's a much nicer colour than black. I'll get some paper and do a few of the rooms gradually in my odd minutes. We'll have the drawing-room and dining-room done professionally, of course. It oughtn't to come to much."

"You'll get covered with paste again, darling. You looked like a walking cookie-boy the last time you did it."

Naomi listened wonderingly. . . . Poverty was bright and radiant in the Vicarage, a thing to laugh at, to joke about. It wasn't like that in the Hall. There it was something cramping, irksome, something that brought that hard tight line between Imogen's beautiful eyes.

§

Peter came to her after lunch, and solemnly held out a small fretwork bracket.

"I've finished it for you, Naomi," he said. "You hang it on the wall. There's the hole you put the nail through."

It was plain, but made with the workmanlike thoroughness that Peter brought to everything he did. It explained his long absence from them during Naomi's visit.

Naomi's thanks were genuine, but she was *distraite*. She'd only been away for a week-end and she'd enjoyed every minute of it, and yet she was longing to go home. She felt as if she'd been away for weeks, for months. And all the glamour in the world hung over her return, over Imogen and the Hall.

"Good-bye, darling. It's been so nice to have you."

"Good-bye, and thank you so much. I've had a lovely time."

"Good-bye, Naomi."

"Good-bye, Vivienne. . . . Good-bye, Tinker. . . . Good-bye, Peter, and thank you so much for the bracket."

She walked down the drive into the tunnel of yew, turning at the gate to wave to the little group—the Vicar, his wife, Vivienne with Tinker in her arms, Peter.

Then she turned and ran quickly down the road and in at the gate of the Hall.

THE door stood open as if to receive her. The sunshine lay in pools on the dark oak floor of the hall. Imogen should have been there, her arms outspread (" How nice to have you back, darling. We've missed you so much"), but, of course, Imogen didn't know what time she was coming back. It was silly to have expected Imogen to be there waiting for her. She passed into the cool low hall. Bowls of roses on the oak chest and the stone mantelpiece. . . . Over everything a golden haze that filtered in through the open door. She drew a deep breath. Her home-coming. One part of her knew that it was absurd to feel like this—she'd only been away from home for two days—but the other part surrendered to the emotional enjoyment of it. She had a vivid imagination, and a habit of enriching every situation with colours from her own mind. She stood in the hall, looking towards the drawing-room door, cheeks flushed, eyes shining.

" Is that you, Naomi ? "

Imogen's voice—calm, cool, withdrawn.

" Yes."

The serenity that had lain upon the child's spirit for the last two days was shattered, and her heart began to beat unevenly. Mrs. Godstone came into the hall. The dull gold of her hair, the creamy pallor of her skin, the intense blue of her eyes, made her beauty striking and rather unusual, but the impression of beauty she gave was less than the impression of something weary and aloof, something faintly disdainful. As her blue eyes fell on Naomi, the tight line between them did not relax.

" Naomi, what on *earth* possessed you to let Roddy get so over-heated and then paddle ? He was in bed all yesterday with a temperature. You really ought to

be able to be trusted to show more sense at your age."

The child looked at her with hardening eyes in silence. Some hidden unconscious part of her read more in the words than their obvious meaning, read an irritation at her return, a secret resentment of her existence. It wasn't the first time she'd glimpsed it between the joints of her mother's armour of mechanical sweetness. Consciously she was aware only of a sudden sick disappointment. This, of course, was the real Imogen. The other Imogen, warm and loving, who came forward with outstretched arms and said " How nice to have you back, darling. We've missed you so much," had never existed at all. She'd made her up.

And the strangest part about it was that she loved the real Imogen—cold and aloof—more than she loved the dream mother she'd invented. She loved her so much that she felt she couldn't live without her love, and that of course was why she'd invented the dream mother.

" I didn't know that it would do him any harm," she said.

She meant to speak penitently, but her self-consciousness and disappointment made her voice sound sulky and defiant.

" Naomi, please don't speak to me like that."

" Sorry."

That was worse. It was as if, once she'd begun to speak in that tone, some mysterious compulsion drove her on despite herself.

" Naomi, whatever's the matter with you? Why on earth have you come home in this mood? Go upstairs to the nursery and have your tea and don't go in to Roddy."

Naomi went upstairs, dragging her toes noisily against each step, trying to make Imogen speak to her again.

She didn't care how cross she was so long as she spoke to her again.

But Imogen had gone back into the drawing-room. From the half-closed door came the sound of Cousin Geraldine's voice. Naomi had forgotten that Cousin Geraldine was coming to stay for the week-end.

Her tea was laid on the nursery table. Milk, bread and butter, strawberry jam and cake. As she sat there eating it, a sudden poignant home-sickness for the Vicarage—for Vivienne and Peter and the tenderness that seemed always to radiate like warmth and light from Vivienne's mother—swept over her. But she knew that if she were at the Vicarage she'ld be longing to be home. It seemed strange to be having tea like this all by herself. Martha and Roddy were usually there with her, but Martha went home on Sundays and Roddy was in bed.

She finished her tea, murmured the mechanical "grace" of childhood, slid off her chair, and after washing her hands went down to the drawing-room.

Naomi was vaguely proud of the drawing-room, because it was quite unlike anyone else's drawing-room. You went down two steps into it, and the fireplace was opposite the door. On one side of the fireplace there was a sort of broad passage with a French window at the end, but the passage was part of the drawing-room. When you were in the fireplace part you couldn't see the people who were in the French window part. Visitors called it "quaint" and "charming," but Mother called it "awkward." Naomi knew that its official description was "L shaped." There was a little Queen Anne walnut bureau near the wall, as you entered, and Hepplewhite chairs stood between the tall windows. The shabbiness of the Hall—unlike the shabbiness of the Vicarage, which was the shabbiness of cheerful makeshifts—was the gracious shabbiness of things that would be beautiful as

long as they existed at all. Damask curtains of faded rose and gold hung at the windows, and on the white walls were faded panels of grey moiré and old prints in gilt frames. Over the fireplace hung a crude oil painting of a ship. Even Naomi could tell that it wasn't a very good painting of a ship, but she knew that Mother kept it there because Father had painted it. Father had died when Naomi was three, and she didn't remember him at all.

Cousin Geraldine and Imogen were sitting by the fireplace. Cousin Geraldine was very tall and thin and elegant. Her grey hair was elaborately coiffured, and she always dressed in the height of fashion whether it suited her or not. She wore jingling necklaces with which her thin restless diamond-covered fingers continually played, and she had a high-pitched tinkling voice.

Imogen turned round as soon as Naomi entered the room.

"Did you have a nice time at the Vicarage, dear?" she said kindly. The child's quick ear caught the note of schooled deliberateness in the kindness, and she stiffened, jerking back her dark head.

"Yes, thanks."

Mrs. Godstone ignored the ungraciousness of her tone.

"Come and speak to Cousin Geraldine, dear."

Naomi hated Cousin Geraldine, hated her tinkling voice and the diamonds on her fingers that seemed like little jeering eyes, hated most of all that faintly mocking smile with which Cousin Geraldine always seemed to watch her.

"Well, Naomi," said Cousin Geraldine, as she kissed her with a faint jingle of jewellery, "you're growing very fast, aren't you, my dear?"

Aunt Geraldine always said that to children, because she could never think of anything else to say. She

wasn't fond of children, nor was she at her best with them. Her lips were dry and hard, rather like a bird's beak, and she seemed to peck at Naomi's cheek as a bird might peck at a worm that it doesn't really want. Even the perfume that came from her seemed amused and mocking, like her eyes and her smile and the twinkling of her diamonds.

"You may stay here and read till bedtime, Naomi, if you like," said Imogen.

Cousin Geraldine's kiss had reminded Naomi that Imogen hadn't kissed her since she came back from the Vicarage.

She fetched her Hans Andersen's fairy-tales and curled up on the window-seat with it. Imogen and Cousin Geraldine were talking together by the fireplace. They were talking about people and things she'd never heard of. They'd quite forgotten her. An obscure pain stirred at her heart. She kept looking at Imogen, but Imogen never turned to meet her eyes. She began to tap with her foot upon the bare boards of the floor at the foot of the window-seat. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. . . . Imogen turned with her quick frown.

"Don't do that, dear, *please*."

A wave of mingled triumph and misery flooded the child's heart.

She stopped, and Imogen turned back to Cousin Geraldine. They forgot her again entirely.

Naomi began to hum softly, monotonously, under her breath. She watched Imogen covertly for the signs that this was beginning to get on her nerves—the frown, the tightening of the lips. At last Imogen turned round to her.

"*Do* be quiet, Naomi."

Again that flood of poignant happiness and unhappiness mingled. She wanted to be quiet now, to be good,

but she couldn't. The sight of Imogen sitting ther turned away from her, talking to Cousin Geraldine, w torture—a torture as incomprehensible as it was unbea able. She went to the china cabinet and, opening i began to move the pieces of Dresden china on th shelves.

"Naomi. I've told you again and again not to touc those. Shut the door at once."

Impelled still by that demon she couldn't control understand, Naomi slammed the glass door to with a her force.

"*Naomi!*" Imogen had flushed. "Naomi, som times I really think you don't care for me at all."

It was exquisite torture to say nothing to that.

Cousin Geraldine was watching with that hatef mocking smile. Naomi still said nothing.

Imogen shrugged half in weariness, half in exasper tion, and turned back to Cousin Geraldine.

Naomi trailed across the room, back to her seat.

And then—it was an accident. She caught her fo in the little table and it fell with a crash. Silver ornamen rolled all over the room.

Imogen raised her hands to her ears, and turned roun with a sharp exclamation.

"Naomi, I can't stand any more. It's nearly yo bedtime. Go to bed at once."

Naomi began to pick up the ornaments. She kne that if she said she was sorry, and that she hadn't mea to knock the table over, Imogen would have forgive her . . . but she couldn't. It was like the sort of nigh mare when you can't move or speak.

"Leave them alone, Naomi. We'll pick them u Go to bed."

Naomi turned and went from the room without sayin good night.

She ran upstairs to her bedroom singing a gay little song in a high-pitched defiant voice. Then she locked the door and, flinging herself upon the bed, burst into a tempest of passionate sobs. She lay there sobbing till she was exhausted, and then fell suddenly into a deep dreamless sleep.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER V

WHEN she awoke it was quite dark. She was rather surprised at first to find herself lying on her bed still wearing her blue serge Sunday frock. Then she remembered. . . .

She slipped off the bed and went to the window. A river of light streamed across the lawn from the drawing-room just below. Mother and Cousin Geraldine hadn't gone to bed yet. . . . She drew up the window at the bottom. The fine weather had broken at last. Rain was falling, and she could see the cedar tree at the end of the lawn swaying in the storm.

She leant as far as she could out of the window. The rain beat upon her face, and the wind, rising higher each moment, howled around her. Right in the distance she could see the black outline of the downs. She forgot everything but the summons that seemed to come to her. It roused something in her so primitive, so deeply rooted, that from earliest childhood she had taken it for granted, had not questioned it or tried to resist it.

She had forgotten Imogen, Roddy, Vivienne—everyone and everything—as she swung herself lightly over the window-sill, and descended the pipe hand over hand with the skill and ease of a monkey. She looked not

unlike a monkey, too, with her short serge frock, long black-stockinged legs, and her black hair blown across he face by the wind. As soon as she'd reached the ground she set off at a run through the garden into the road The wind and rain beat against her. She had to fight he way against them as she ran. A strange wild exultatio surged at her heart. She ran like a sprite of the storm holding up her face to the rain, her light childish form se tense against the hurricane. When she reached the ope downland the wind nearly swung her off her feet.

She stood bracing herself against it, gasping for breath It was ecstasy almost too intense to be endured. The she ran on again through the darkness till she fe exhausted, and lay on her back on the soaked earth nea a stunted hawthorn bush, her face upturned to the sky her eyes closed.

Suddenly she sat up, pushing back her hair, an looked about her. The downs were black, swept b wind and rain. The clouds raced about the sky. Sh remembered the last time she'd been up here at nigh Lightning had flashed across the downs and the thunde had cracked like the trump of doom. Only she hadn seemed to be watching the thunderstorm. She'd *bee* the thunderstorm. . . . So now she wasn't hersel She was the wind and the rain, and the clouds that race across the sky.

Suddenly she saw a dark figure coming across th moor. She shrank back into the shadow of the bush a the figure approached. It was a gipsy woman, he gleaming head uncovered, walking through the storm with the silent fearless tread of a wild animal. Sh passed Naomi without seeing her. Naomi watched he till she was out of sight. She was on her way, probably to join a gipsy encampment. Naomi could see them a vividly as if they were actually before her . . . huddlin

in the caravans, the remnants of their fire smouldering in the rain, the lean prowling dogs, the hobbled horses sleeping uneasily in the scanty shadow of the trees. She leapt to her feet as if to follow the woman, then remembered suddenly. The Hall, Imogen, Roddy . . . her home. It was queer, but just for that moment she'd pictured the encampment as her home. The Hall . . . it didn't seem as real to her somehow as that gipsy encampment. . . .

She heard a clock striking in the distance, and turned to run back. The storm still raged, the rain beat down upon her, the wind caught her at every turn, choking her, sweeping her off her feet.

When she reached her bedroom she was so breathless that she could scarcely stand, but all the unrest of her spirit was stilled. She felt calm and happy, at peace with everyone. She slipped out of her wet clothes, a slim white wand of a child, put on her nightdress and dressing-gown and began to dry her hair. Then she heard voices on the stairs. Imogen and Cousin Geraldine were coming upstairs. The voices were at the door of Cousin Geraldine's bedroom now. She heard a "Good night," and the closing of Cousin Geraldine's door.

Imogen was coming on alone to her own bedroom. Naomi opened her door suddenly just as she was passing it.

"I've been out on the downs, mother. I've only just got back."

In her new mood of tranquillity she wanted to "confess," to take whatever punishment Imogen would give her for breaking rules, to "start fresh."

Imogen Godstone looked at the small figure, the wet black elfin locks hanging about the pale glowing face, the red lips, the dark eyes with their strange brilliance.

She looked at it for a moment in silence, then frowned, bit her lip, and passed on with a faint disdainful shrug to her own bedroom, closing the door. She hadn't spoken a word.

Naomi went into her room again. The brightness had faded from her eyes. She was staring in front of her, her lips set in a tight unchildish line. And her mind went back to that moment, one of the first moments that she could remember, when she realised that the way Imogen kissed her was quite different from the way she kissed Roddy. The discovery had meant nothing to her then. She had taken it for granted, as one takes all one's surroundings for granted in babyhood. Throughout her childhood till now she had looked upon Imogen's coldness as the natural consequence of her naughtiness. She knew that she was " difficult," and generally more " difficult " with Imogen than with anyone. Besides, Imogen was never demonstrative even with Roddy. A casual observer would have seen no difference in her treatment of the two children. But now—that unguarded look of weary disgust had opened the child's eyes. It wasn't just that she was naughty, and Imogen grieved by her naughtiness. It was that Imogen actually and actively disliked her, not for anything she'd done, but for something she was, for something in her for which she wasn't responsible. That look in Imogen's eyes had been like the flick of a whip upon her bare body. At the memory of it a sudden tempest of anger seized her. She took the framed photograph of Imogen that stood on the mantelpiece, and flung it with all her might on to the floor. It lay there, the glass smashed, the sides broken away. She snatched it up, tore the cardboard across, and flung it into the fireplace. She'd torn it across several times, but the face lay there on the coals untorn, the eyes looking at Naomi with the weary aloofness she knew so

well. She took it up with trembling hands, and thrust it into the drawer where she kept her private things, the only drawer that had a key.

Suddenly there came a gentle tapping at the wall. That was Roddy, of course—Roddy, who'd been waiting for her to go to see him ever since she came home. Her tense little face relaxed. She wasn't jealous of Roddy. She loved him too deeply, felt his dependence on her too poignantly for that.

She slipped from the room and down the carpeted passage on her bare feet, opening Roddy's door as soundlessly as she'd opened her own.

§

"Namy."

It was a whisper, eager, welcoming. It said "At last!"

"Roddikin!"

That was the special name that no one ever called him but Naomi.

She was lying on his bed, her arms around him. His thin clinging body awoke a passionate protective love in her, made her forget suddenly all her anger and misery.

"Namy, I've been waiting for you and *waiting* for you."

"Do you feel all right now, Roddy?"

"Yes. I'm quite all right. The temperture went before tea-time" (Roddy always thought of his "temperture" as a sort of invisible demon with horns and hooves), "but they wouldn't let me get up. . . . Do tell me about it all."

"Don't talk aloud, Roddy. Mother will hear."

"Tell me about it."

She told him. He wouldn't let her miss out a single

incident. It was Peter, of course, that he wanted to hear about most of all. Naomi described the picnic, repeating to him all that Peter had told them about birds and butterflies. His eyes shone.

"He's so brave, isn't he?" he said. "He climbs the most *dangerous* trees to watch birds."

He was thrilled to hear of the bracket.

"You'll show it to me to-morrow, won't you?"

"Shall I give it to you?"

"Oh, *no* . . . he wouldn't like it. Oh, Namy, it's so lovely to have you back. I've been so lonely without you."

She clasped him to her tightly. It was as if all the love and devotion that had been Imogen's had altered its course, and flowed now in a passionate turgid stream to Roddy.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER VI

Naomi entered the hall, threw her gloves down upon the hall table, then stood for a moment looking at them dreamily. How uncanny gloves looked when you'd just taken them off, every knuckle, every crease, queerly displayed, as if they still held the ghosts of your hands inside them! It was rather horrible. She flattened them firmly. Imogen came out of the morning-room.

"Has Roddy come in?" asked Naomi. Imogen nodded. She looked more worn, more weary than she had looked nine years ago, and yet in some curious way her beauty was increased rather than lessened by it. Haggardness became her. The lines of her mouth were exquisite, the blue eyes shadowed but unclouded.

"Is he in his room?"

"Yes. Don't go to him, Naomi. Lunch is almost ready."

" All right. I'll go and get tidy."

She ran upstairs to her bedroom, several steps at a time, took off her hat and coat, tidied her hair at the glass, and straightened the shirt blouse, with its stiff collar and tie, and the long full skirt. Then she looked down at the garden. On the lawn a couple of thrushes were making little short runs forward, then stopping dead, one a little way behind another. It was a sort of ceremonial dance. At the end of the lawn the cedar tree stood motionless, sharply outlined against the blue sky. Beneath the tree was a violet shadow and then the grass of the lawn startlingly green. Naomi looked at it as if trying to fix it in her mind for ever—the grey cedar tree against the blue sky, the violet shadow and the green grass. She'd seen it hundreds of times before, of course, but sometimes, as now, her faculties seemed to be suddenly intensified, and she saw things with a haze of unearthly beauty over them. Gradually the moment passed. The scene became ordinary, familiar once more.

She had had these moments of clarified vision at intervals ever since her early teens. She had never told anyone about them. With the moments came always vague longings, painful, ecstatic, incomprehensible. She treasured them, hugging their glamour to her, savouring as it were the last lingering seconds of it. The memory of them was like a talisman in those gusts of passion and despair that sometimes swept over her.

But the moment had passed. However long she looked at the cedar and the lawn now, they would remain just the cedar and the lawn. That strange unearthly light of beauty had faded from them. She moved her eyes slowly to the distance where she could see the dark square of the railway bridge and the winding of the river. It reminded her of that day nine years ago when

she'd gone down to the river with Roddy and Peter and Vivienne, the first day of her visit to the Vicarage. That visit stood out so sharply in her memory that she could remember vividly the smallest incident of it. It marked for her the end of her childhood. It was as if she had grown up in the moment when Imogen's eyes had met hers with that unveiled revulsion in their blue depth. From that moment Naomi carried in her heart the knowledge that Imogen, though her mother, disliked her, and disliked her for something she didn't know about, and couldn't help. From that moment she had ceased to make any effort to win Imogen's love. Outwardly their relations had improved. Naomi had shrunk into her shell, had become reserved, docile and much more manageable. And Imogen, on her side, had seemed more affectionate, had made spasmodic overtures to the child, as if sensing her withdrawal and afraid lest she should have betrayed herself. She found Naomi no longer "difficult," but almost unbelievably "hard."

Naomi had left school last month, and it still seemed strange to her to be living like this at the Hall without the end of the holidays looming a week or two ahead. She suspected that Imogen found the situation as strange as she did. She suspected, too, that Imogen had encouraged her to stay at school till she was nineteen, because she shrank from the time when they should be living together at the Hall like this. The one bond between them, of course, was their love for Roddy.

Roddy had left school too and had gone into Uncle Frederick's factory. Uncle Frederick was stout, purse-proud and patronising, and Roddy hated both him and the work. He went into Howton, where the factory was, in the morning, and came back in the evening. To-day, however, was Saturday, and he would be at home for lunch.

§

The lunch-bell sounded, and Naomi ran lightly downstairs to the dining-room where Imogen was already in her place.

Roddy entered a few minutes after they had sat down, and took his place at the table with a muttered apology. Imogen glanced at him anxiously. His brow was drawn into a frown, and he stared blackly in front of him at the table-cloth.

He had grown very tall, but his childhood's air of fragility had not left him. He was pale, and the curve of his lips showed sensitiveness and refinement. His hands were artist's hands, long and narrow, and the deep setting of his dark eyes lent an unconscious look of pathos, almost of tragedy, to his pale face. He began to eat the meal in silence, ignoring the other two. The movements of his hands were jerky and unsteady. His brows were still tightly contracted. The two women were uneasily aware of his ill-humour, as, ignoring him, they discussed village affairs.

"Are you going to the Vicarage this afternoon, Naomi?"

"Yes. They're having Lily Birch and some other people to tea. I promised Vivienne that I'ld help."

"One feels quite afraid of Vivienne nowadays."

"Because of her scholarships? She's always exactly the same, you know."

"How long is Peter being at home?"

"I don't know. He doesn't sail till next year. But he's getting his outfit together."

"I wonder what sort of a farmer he'll make?"

"A very good one, I should think."

"It's dreadful to see all the young men going out of England."

Then Imogen turned to Roddy, making a determined effort to draw him into the conversation.

"What sort of a morning have you had, Roddy?"

He raised his head jerkily, and shot out "Damnable!" with vicious shortness. Imogen flushed and her lips tightened. A trim housemaid (Imogen's maids were always trim, her house always well run, despite her straitened means) had entered and was putting the sweets upon the table.

Roddy waved away his helping. "I don't want anything more, thanks."

"Roddy, don't be silly. You've hardly touched anything and you had your breakfast at seven. You'ld feel better if you had a proper lunch. You——"

"Oh, for God's sake," he exploded fiercely, "leave me alone."

"*Roddy!*"

"I'm sorry. It's—the beastly noise. I can't get it out of my head. I'll go now, please."

They heard him go upstairs to his room and close the door.

They finished the meal in silence, and then went into the drawing-room, where Imogen poured out coffee.

"I'll take Roddy's to him," said Naomi.

"He's best left alone."

But Naomi was already on her way upstairs.

"It's only I, Roddy. I've brought your coffee."

"All right, come in."

The room had been given to Roddy as a workroom-study many years ago. It held the traces of his boyish interests and hobbies—the little wooden table that he'd made under Peter's direction, and the cases of butterflies and books of stamps that Peter had helped him to collect. They spoke of Peter rather than Roddy. They were

survivals of the days of his adoration of Peter. He had followed Peter blindly in those days, and had had no tastes at all of his own. But when he had emerged from little boyhood and formed his own tastes, they were very different from Peter's, and now, in place of the old hero worship, was indifference bordering on contempt on either side. Roddy despised Peter, because Peter hadn't anything of the intellectual in him, and Peter, a fine athlete, had lost all interest in Roddy when he found that he was a " highbrow." Roddy's tastes were shown in the book-shelves that lined the room, the two etchings on the wall, and the reproduction of John of Bologna's Mercury that was the only ornament.

His school career had been disappointing. He had been dreamy and erratic, refusing to make any effort in subjects in which he was not interested. Often one picture, suggested in a lesson, would fix itself upon his vivid undisciplined imagination, and for the rest of the morning he saw nothing else.

The literary side of the classics appealed to him, but he had not the patience to master their drudgery.

Imogen had been worried about his future, and frankly relieved when Uncle Frederick offered to give him work. He was to be paid a salary at first, and afterwards made a partner.

" It's a splendid opportunity, Roddy," Imogen had said when they talked it over.

" Y-yes, I suppose so," he had replied without enthusiasm.

" But, of course, if there's anything else you'ld rather do . . . ? "

" Oh, no," Roddy had said, " there isn't."

And so he had gone into Uncle Frederick's factory.

And then, as soon as he'd definitely taken up the work, he had begun to model in clay up here in his room. He

worked feverishly, unhappily, driven by some inner compulsion that he couldn't understand or resist. The results of his work were crude studies that exasperated and terrified him. They stood on a table now by the window, covered with a cloth. He had not shown them to anyone but Naomi. When Imogen discovered his new interest, she was, for the first time in her life, coldly hostile to him, and, though she knew that he worked on them far into the night, she showed her disapproval by never even referring to them.

Naomi herself was puzzled by them. They were unlike any other models she had ever seen—queerly forceful, almost brutally rough and unconventional. They suggested not forms fashioned from clay as much as clay forming itself into strange shapes at the bidding of some indwelling genie.

Roddy was sitting now in a low chair before the table, his head buried in his hands, when Naomi entered.

She closed the door softly and went across to him, sinking on to the floor by his chair.

" Roddy darling, has it been so very bad ? "

" It's damnable ! " he said again. He spoke unsteadily, like a little boy on the verge of tears.

" It's the noise of his beastly machinery. It's still going through and through my head. I'm sorry I was so rude downstairs. Mother doesn't understand. It's the noise. It's—hell. It'll drive me mad. The noise and the smell . . . and the people . . . I hate every one of them. I could *kill* Uncle Frederick . . . his filthy jokes . . . and the noise all the time . . . all the time . . . the noise."

She caught him to her and held his head on her breast, soothing him as she'd done hundreds of times when he was a little boy.

" Oh, Roddy darling . . . darling ! "

"Mother doesn't understand."

"I know. . . . It's because she knows you've got to work, and she doesn't see any other way."

He raised his head, and looked across at the table with its shrouded shapes.

"Even those . . . Naomi, everything's so hateful. I don't want to do them, but I've—I've *got* to go on. I know they're no good, but I've *got* to go on doing them. And yet sometimes—I feel—— It comes quite suddenly. It's heaven. I *know* that I can—do things. Then I drop down into hell again and I know I can't. Do you understand?"

Naomi nodded.

She thought of her "moments." Something like that came to Roddy, only more vivid because Roddy had the creative faculty as well as the artist's vision.

"Have your coffee, Roddy."

"Oh, Namy, you old fuss-pot."

But already he was feeling better. He took the cup and looked at her with a faint smile.

"Anyway I've got the week-end. A blessed day and a half. . . . Was I frightfully rude to mother? I didn't mean to be."

"It's all right. She understands. Are you going out this afternoon, Roddy?"

He shook his head. In the bright afternoon light his boyish face looked strained and weary.

"No. I'm going on with something I began last night."

"Roddy, take a holiday. Come out with me."

"I thought you were going to the Vicarage."

"I'll tell them I can't come. Let's take our tea and go to the Happy Valley."

"I can't. I'd love to, but I've got to go on with this. I feel that there's nothing I'd love so much as to come

with you, but if I came I'ld be miserable, I'ld be longing to come back to this all the time."

"Try to forget everything. Come with me to the Vicarage. They'ld be so pleased."

"Good God, no! Lily Birch making eyes and Peter gassing about his cricket and football."

"He doesn't, Roddy. He never mentions them unless you ask him."

"I know, but it's the only thing he can talk about, so you've got to ask him. Thanks for coming up, Namy."

It was a dismissal. She kissed him, and went slowly downstairs.

Imogen was in the hall. She looked at Naomi absently, unsmiling, as if she were thinking of something else.

"Come into the drawing-room a minute, Naomi, please. I want to speak to you."

Naomi followed her into the drawing-room.

"How's Roddy?"

"He's better. He didn't mean to be rude."

Imogen made a frowning gesture of deprecation.

"My dear, of course he didn't. I hadn't given it another thought, but—Naomi, I want you to help me. Roddy thinks a lot of your opinion."

Naomi knew that it had cost Imogen something to make that admission. She waited in silence. Imogen spoke again as if with an effort.

"He's still—interested in his modelling?"

"Yes."

"You must try to make him give it up, Naomi."

"Why?"

"His work at the factory is so terribly important. He'll do no good there as long as his whole interest is in those things upstairs. It's—madness."

"You don't understand, mother——"

"I do understand. The factory's hateful at first.

He'll get used to it. Everyone finds the noise trying at first. They get used to it. But he'll never get on as long as he's wasting his time over the sort of thing he's doing upstairs."

"He *must* have a hobby," said Naomi defiantly. Imogen went on as if she had not heard her.

"This offer of Uncle Frederick's is a wonderful thing for him. I never thought he'ld make it. He'll make Roddy partner if Roddy puts his back into it. That means that the whole thing will be Roddy's when Uncle Frederick retires. Your father threw up his chances, Naomi. I don't want to see Roddy doing the same."

It was the first time that Naomi remembered Imogen's mentioning her father.

"How did father throw up his chances?" she asked.

Imogen's calmness deserted her. The agitation of some old struggle had seized her.

"It was the same thing—just the same thing. That's why I'm so frightened. He thought he was an artist. He refused to go into the factory. He sold his share in it. He was sure he could keep himself by his painting. He couldn't. His things were—pitiful. He never sold one. They were—daubs. Look, there's one." She pointed to the crude painting of the ship that hung over the fireplace. "That's the best he ever did. I keep it there because he was proud of it. He was a sensible man in every other way, but in this way he was *blind*." Imogen's agitation increased. Her breast rose and fell quickly. Bright spots burnt in her cheeks. Emotion of years ago held her in their grasp. It was strange to hear the cold slow voice quivering with passion, stumbling breathlessly over words.

"He wouldn't listen to reason. He was convinced that he had talent and that he'ld succeed in the end. He

never sold a single picture. He spent the money he'd got through the sale of his share of the factory, and when he died there was barely enough for us to live on. You know how careful we've had to be, Naomi . . . and for Roddy to throw away a chance like this just because he doesn't like the noise . . . "—she beat her hands together—" oh, it's childishness, it's *madness*! "

" I could get a post," said Naomi. " I've been thinking ever since I left school——"

Imogen interrupted her.

" That's not the point. Do try to understand, Naomi. I've been through it once with your father. I can't go through it again with Roddy."

" But, mother, just because father hadn't any talent it doesn't prove that Roddy hasn't."

" My dear, look at the things he does. He doesn't even think they're good himself. In his heart he *knows* they aren't. He *mustn't* go on behaving like a child. If I didn't think that he'ld be more unhappy if he gave up his post, I wouldn't say a word. But I've seen it. I've been through it. He'll get used to the work at the factory. He'll grow to like it."

Naomi was silent.

" Naomi, please help me."

The tone was suddenly tender, pleading. It caught at Naomi's heart and set it racing. It brought back vividly that mother of her childhood's imagining who sometimes even now visited her in dreams. But loyalty to Roddy came first. She turned her head away and spoke unsteadily.

" I can't promise to influence Roddy to give it up. He—can't give it up while he feels as he does about it."

" Very well," said Imogen. Her voice was her ordinary voice again—tired, cold, aloof. " You must do what you think best, of course."

Naomi looked at her. She was gazing into space. She'd forgotten Naomi, forgotten everything around her. She was living through old scenes, battling with old agonies.

Naomi slipped upstairs, her heart beating unevenly, to get ready for her visit to the Vicarage.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER VII

Naomi enjoyed her visits to the Vicarage almost as much as she had enjoyed them in her childhood. There seemed still to be a sort of magic quality in the yew tree tunnel. You entered it from the Hall world, and came out at the other end in a sudden blaze of light into the Vicarage world. It was like the green door in *Alice in Wonderland*. . . .

There was a party at the Vicarage this afternoon, the last party of the summer. Mrs. Darrent had been preparing for it all the week. Small, plump and middle-aged, she was still just like an eager child.

She greeted Naomi with that large-hearted, motherly affection that in Naomi's memories had shed a sort of radiance over her childhood.

"Darling, how *nice* to see you! You didn't bring Roddy or your mother with you?"

"No. I'm sorry. They couldn't come."

Imogen took no interest in the village, and had stopped visiting in it many years ago. People asked her now only as a matter of form. She was vaguely supposed to be "delicate," and excused on that score.

"Peter will be sorry not to see Roddy."

Mrs. Darrent, for all her warm-heartedness, lacked

perception. She had never realised that the old friendship between the two boys had long since lapsed.

"How's Roddy getting on at the factory?" she continued.

"Uncle Frederick says he's doing well."

"That's splendid."

Smiling expansively at Naomi, she bustled off, happy and eager, to attend to her other guests.

§

Vivienne was standing on the lawn with an elderly clergyman who was the Vicar of a neighbouring village. He was congratulating her on the scholarship she had just won to Girton, intoning his congratulations as if they were the Litany.

Vivienne had altered little. Her face was still small and humorous and expressive, ready to twist itself into a hundred comical shapes. Her lips were mobile and sensitive, but the green lights in her eyes seemed to defy and ridicule her own sensitiveness as well as everything else.

As soon as she saw Naomi she cut short Mr. Borrowdale's congratulations, and, seizing Naomi's hand, ran with her into the kitchen garden.

"Darling, they're all being so terribly heavy about it. They're making me feel so dreadfully earnest and scholarly. I must try and get back to myself." She turned three cart-wheels on the brick path and sprang lightly to her feet after the last. "There! That's better. The next time anyone congratulates me I'm going to put out my tongue. Why can't people have the decency to ignore it? Lily's driven poor Peter into the stables. Let's go back again. I'm good now."

They went back to the garden. Mr. Borrowdale had

found someone else to talk to, and was expounding his views on the political problems of the day. He was a thoughtful, intelligent man, but he took his pulpit manner about with him wherever he went, and so people hardly ever listened to what he said.

"I'll tell Peter you've come," said Vivienne. "Do watch Lily. She's by the copper beech with the Bruces."

Naomi looked around her at the groups of visitors on the lawn.

When they were children she, Vivienne, Peter and Roddy had seemed to be the only people in the village. Then gradually the adult population had dawned upon their outlook—Mrs. Masterson, whose house was so full of curios and antiques that one could scarcely move in it, and who was continually making resolutions not to buy any more and breaking them the next day ; Mrs. Tancred, the repository of all gossip and scandal, real or imagined, for miles around ; Dr. Fuller, who carried his bedside manner about with him as completely and unconsciously as Mr. Borrowdale carried his pulpit manner ; and Mrs Fuller, who was so terribly discreet that she seldom opened her mouth to say anything without closing it again and leaving the remark unuttered. She prided herself on always asking herself, "Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary?" before she said anything, and as it seldom was all three she seldom spoke.

Lily Birch was standing with the Bruces, where Vivienne had pointed her out, near the copper beech. She was less fat and less pale than she had been in her childhood—she had even grown pretty in a sharp, anxious fashion—but she still looked as if she were (as indeed she was) always afraid of missing something. Since leaving school last year, she had concentrated all her faculties upon the task of getting engaged. She had surveyed the eligible youth of her neighbourhood with

the eye of a general marshalling his forces, and had already made preliminary assaults upon one or two of them. She had no doubt at all of her powers. The only drawback was that in fixing upon one she would have to let the others go, and Lily could never bear to let anything go. She had had an incipient affair with an eligible doctor in Lainsforth, but had dropped it because she had met an eligible architect from Howton. It wasn't that she liked the architect better than the doctor. It was that to become finally engaged to the doctor would be to miss the architect. On the other hand, of course, to become finally engaged to the architect would be to miss the doctor. Lily found life a torturing affair. For instance, one could only be in one place at once. Lily never went anywhere without having lacerating suspicions that she was missing something somewhere else. And even in the one place you could be in, you could only talk to one set of people at once. Lily was a familiar sight at parties, standing with a group of people, talking absently, her pale anxious eyes wandering round the room, gazing with an expression of wistful longing at all the other groups.

§

Macaulay Bruce was the middle-aged organist of Lainsforth Parish Church. He was a large, rather foolish-looking man, who had never spent a day apart from his mother during all the forty years of his life. Whether it were the cause or the consequence of this no one knew, but without being exactly simple he was undeveloped and rather childish. He was inclined to be delicate, and submitted quite willingly even in public to his mother's "cosseting," appearing in goloshes and mufflers and a chest protector for the greater part of the

year. Despite all this, however, he was a talented organist with keen musical appreciation.

They lived in rooms in Lainsforth with Mrs. Bruce's personal maid, who had been with her since her girlhood, and who, having spent most of her life with her mistress, bore a curious likeness to her in manner and appearance. Macaulay's hobbies were carpentering and collecting wild flowers, and the three of them used to go for frequent gentle country expeditions in the summer in order to add to Macaulay's wild flower collection. Chambers, the maid, always carried a picnic basket, and the greater part of their time was spent in searching for a sheltered spot for tea. Mrs. Bruce was an interesting old lady, well read and, except on the subject of her son, whom she considered a genius, quite intelligent. She had formerly opposed all matrimonial assaults upon her son, but there was no doubt at all that she was encouraging Lily. She had had a severe attack of pneumonia the winter before, and it was suggested that she had now decided to train up a wife for Macaulay against the time when she should have to leave him. Certainly Lily had been seen with them on their expeditions several times lately. She had, it is true, walked with Chambers when the party split up into twos, but there was no doubt at all that Mrs. Bruce was being quite gracious to her.

Lily had worked hard for the friendly footing she stood on with the Bruces, and now that she'd won it she was seized with panic lest in winning it she'd missed something else. Her eyes roved round the garden anxiously. They fell on Naomi. Naomi had arrived alone, so Roddy evidently wasn't here. The Bruces were fairly well off, but the Godstone factory would belong to Roddy one day and he'ld be a rich man. Still, he wasn't there this afternoon, so it was no use worrying about that just now. And he was very brusque in his manner, almost rude

indeed, when she did make overtures of friendship to him. Her eye passed on. Peter was just coming round from the stables with Scamp at his heels. Scamp was Peter's sheep dog. They had bought him as a puppy after Tinker had been gored by a bull with whom he was trying to play. Lily had been greatly shocked by Vivienne's hard, gay, high spirits the day after Tinker's death. She always said afterwards that Vivienne had "no feeling." Peter, of course, thought Lily, watching him, was going out to Africa to take up farming. That rather ruled him out. Or did it? Suppose that the kindness of Mrs. Bruce meant nothing, after all, and that Macaulay didn't propose. . . . It seemed silly to let Peter go. She had a vague idea that people had a very jolly time abroad.

Mrs. Masterson was talking eagerly to the doctor's wife.

"And, my dear, it was the very pair of the one I have in my drawing-room, the one in papier mâché inlaid with mother of pearl, you know. . . . I went in and bought it at once."

The doctor's wife opened her mouth to say, "But, my dear, you've nowhere to put it," then decided that, though true, it wasn't necessary—nor indeed *quite* kind—and closed it again.

"I shan't buy anything else, of course, now," said Mrs. Masterson hastily, as if reading the doctor's wife's unspoken thought. "I haven't room for anything, so I can't. But I simply couldn't let that go."

Jane, assisted by a girl from the village who occasionally "obliged" at the Vicarage, brought out the tea, and set it under the copper beech. Mrs. Darrent began to pour out, and Peter and the doctor handed round the cups. The doctor, a dapper little man, was gentle and reassuring and, even when he was only handing you a cup

of tea, seemed to be saying, "Now there's nothing to worry about. We'll have you up and about again before you know where you are."

Mrs. Tancred had arrived late, and had attached herself to Naomi, to Peter's obvious chagrin. He sulked openly, and hovered about Naomi in the intervals of handing round the tea. There was nothing subtle about Peter. Whatever his emotions were, he displayed them openly to the whole world. He had grown into a tall, handsome youth of fine physique, still rather slow in his movements, as if he hadn't quite left behind the awkwardness of immaturity. He was far less sophisticated than are most boys of his age, and he was genuinely modest about his prowess in sport. Intellectually he was, as Roddy had discovered, limited, but he was kind, sincere, courageous, and without affectation or conceit of any sort.

"And, my dear, The Towers!" Mrs. Tancred was saying to Naomi. "*Have* you see it? Oh, *have* you seen it?"

"The Towers?" said Naomi vaguely.

"Oh, surely you know about The Towers?"

"No, I don't think I do," said Naomi.

"Oh, my dears!" Mrs. Tancred appealed vaguely to a group of rhododendron bushes. "She doesn't know about The Towers! The Towers, my dear! The Belson man!"

Naomi smiled her bewilderment. "No. I'm sorry. I haven't heard anything about it. I was at school, you know, last term. And I was away on a walking holiday at Easter."

"Oh, but, my dear! The Towers! The Belson man!" She appealed to Peter, who was lolling near her chair, his hands in his pockets, scowling at her. "Surely you know about The Towers, Peter?"

"The house he's building?" said Peter shortly. "Yes, I've seen it."

"But, my dear, isn't it *terrible*!"

"It seems all right to me," said Peter.

"Oh, Peter. It doesn't! It *can't*! Turrets, Naomi, my dear. Turrets and little loop-holes to shoot through. Gables and pinnacles and balconies and pediments all over the place. It's simply priceless. It's a glorious mixture of a mediæval fortress and a mosque and a picture palace. It's not quite finished yet, so you can't see it in its real glory, but whenever I feel depressed I always go to look at it."

"Where is it?" said Naomi.

"It's just beyond Lainsforth, on the main road."

"I never go beyond Lainsforth. I only go into Lainsforth when I have to. I hate the main roads."

"Yes, but it's worth going over miles and miles of main road to see The Towers. You ought to go and see it."

"I've seen it," said Peter again pugnaciously. "I don't see anything wrong with it."

"But you're a Philistine, dear Peter. You're allowed to be a Philistine. Anyone as good-looking as you, and who's played football for England, is allowed to be a Philistine. You'ld be *too* irresistible if you were artistic as well."

Peter glared at her fiercely.

"Who *are* these Belsons?" said Naomi.

The feathers in Mrs. Tancred's hat danced again.

"Darling, it's not these Belsons. It's *the* Belson. It's Belson's Blacking. Surely you've seen it advertised. He's a *nouveau riche*. Terribly *riche* and still more terribly *nouveau*. He's coming to live here. He's building The Towers. They say that he's drawn up the plans himself, and the first architect he showed them to dropped dead on the spot, and the one who finally undertook them daren't show his face in daylight. . . . I know someone

who knows him. Knows Belson, not the architect. They say he's simply appalling. . . . Isn't that Mrs. Gledway? Darling, it's simply *ages* since I saw you."

Peter and Naomi drifted away.

"Silly fool!" muttered Peter. "I can't think why the mater wanted to ask her."

"Peter darling, you're huffy because she said you weren't artistic."

"Thank God I'm not artistic," said Peter furiously.

Mrs. Darrent was sitting at the tea-table under the copper beech, gazing around her with naïve pride and pleasure. Everything was going off beautifully. No small child at its first party felt more eager excitement and joy than Mrs. Darrent felt when she had the village to tea.

"Look at mother," said Vivienne, joining Naomi and Peter, "loving every minute of it. Isn't she a duck?"

Her sharp little face had softened as she watched her. "Doesn't it *show* what a duck she is," she went on, "that she's kept like this? She makes me feel about a hundred."

"I bet she does—you with your laurels fresh upon you, as old Borrowdale said," said Peter.

"Oh, *shut* up!"

"He's annoyed," said Naomi, "because Mrs. Tancred thinks he isn't artistic."

§

The Vicar had appeared among the guests, and was shaking hands and greeting each with his formal, old-fashioned courtesy of manner. It was an understood thing that the Vicar was too busy to attend tea-parties

even at his own home. But he always put in an appearance very punctiliously for a minute or two. He had just returned from a farm five miles away on the downs, and he looked tired and travel-stained. After tea he was going to see a sick child as many miles distant in the other direction. On his way he'ld call at the house of a drunken reprobate, who invariably shut the door in his face with a flood of abuse but was beginning to feel aggrieved if a week went by without his calling. Then he'ld take evensong and after that the Boys' Bible-class. He stooped a good deal more than he had stooped nine years ago, but his mouth had kept its shrewd, humorous curves, and the light in his blue eyes glowed more deeply, more strongly than ever.

He stood by Vivienne with his hand on her shoulder.

"You've heard what this young woman's done, haven't you?" he said to Naomi.

He was intensely proud of Vivienne's success.

Vivienne laughed and said lightly, "Oh, daddy, they're all bored stiff with the subject," but her face had hardened slightly, and Naomi remembered the child Vivienne with long black-stockinged legs, an overall and red plaits, who had said passionately, "I'm not a *person* to him at all."

"It's such *rot*!" went on Vivienne, "it's simply a matter of being able to memorise and reproduce. It's —little tricks of the trade, you know. Dragging classy little phrases into your proses by the skins of their teeth——"

The Vicar smiled, and passed on to where his wife sat behind the tea-table. He looked down at her, supremely happy in her happiness.

"Tea, darling?" she said, stretching out a hand to the tea-pot.

"No, no tea," he said. "I must be off. I just called in to look at you for a second."

Her glow faded slightly.

"Oh, *do* have tea," she pleaded, but she knew it was useless.

He was tiresome about food. She hated Wednesdays and Fridays, and she dreaded Lent all the year round.

"I think I've spoken to everyone," he said, "so good-bye, darling. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He went across the lawn, and disappeared into the house.

The young people were getting up sets of tennis. Peter and Vivienne and Naomi and Lily played together. Lily was Peter's partner, but she was anxious and *distraite*, and didn't hear anything that Peter said to her. She was watching the Bruces, wondering whether she'd missed anything by leaving them to play tennis. But, if she'd stayed with them she'ld have been just as uneasy, wondering if she'd missed anything by not playing tennis. . . .

§

The party was beginning to break up. Mr. Borrowdale discovered that he must go to take evensong, and Dr. Fuller discovered that he must go to his surgery, and gradually everyone went. Naomi stayed behind, as she had always done after the Vicarage parties.

"Darling, it went off beautifully," said Vivienne, dropping on the grass by her mother's chair and pulling Naomi down with her.

"It did, didn't it?" said Mrs. Darrent happily. "You know, I was so much afraid that I'd put too much baking powder into the scones, but I hadn't, had I?"

"They tasted divine, darling."

"And everyone liked those little cakes. Mrs. Fuller asked me for the recipe. Yes, I really think everyone enjoyed it."

"They loved it."

Mrs. Darrent's radiance clouded for a moment.

"I wish father had had some tea. He only took a few sandwiches out with him for lunch. Vee, go to the study and ask him to come and have some now. I'll make some more tea."

"He's not there, darling. I saw him go off about ten minutes ago."

"He's so thin. It worries me."

"He's happy, darling."

The radiance returned. "Of course. And the doctor says that he's twice as fit as people who coddle themselves."

"As Macaulay, for instance. I asked him if he collected bog flowers, and he said no, because his mother didn't like him getting his feet wet. I believe he's over forty. He'll probably give Lily a clinical thermometer for a wedding present."

"He's a very good man, dear," said Mrs. Darrent (she was so tender-hearted that she hated to hear anyone made fun of), "though he's been foolishly brought up. And I daresay that Lily will make him a very good wife."

"She's not got him yet."

Peter came sauntering up to them. "Let's have another game. I'll take on the two of you."

"Oh, no," said Vivienne, "you're too strenuous, Peter. You give one no peace. Your service shatters my nerves. Let's help carry the things in, and then go for a ride. You've got your bicycle here, haven't you, Naomi?"

"Yes."

Naomi leapt to her feet, and they carried the plates

and cups to the big, old-fashioned kitchen where Jane, who always marked her disapproval of any entertainment at the Vicarage by maintaining a complete silence even when addressed, received them with her grimmest looks.

"Now run off, children," said Mrs. Darrent, "and get your ride before it's dark. I'll help Jane to wash up the things."

Peter had got his bicycle from the shed.

"Where shall we go?" he said.

"Let's go into the wood and get some beech leaves," said Vivienne. "They're just beginning to turn."

"Why not go and see The Towers?" said Naomi. "Let's go and see if it's really as bad as Mrs. Tancred says it is."

"Well, I've seen it and it seems all right to me," said Peter.

"Then it's probably pretty awful," said Vivienne.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER VIII

They got rid of Scamp as usual by saying "Church." Scamp, though old and feeble, still considered it his duty to accompany them on all their expeditions, displaying the utmost cunning in circumventing their attempts to escape him. The only place to which he would allow them to set off unaccompanied was the church, as experience had taught him that from the church he would be ignominiously ejected.

"The poor old chap must think we're all bad cases of religious mania," said Peter as Scamp turned to go back to the house. "Apparently we spend every minute of every day in church."

"It makes one feel frightfully mean," said Vivienne. "I quite dread meeting him on the Judgment Day, when he'll learn that we only went to church once a week. Or won't they count the lies you tell to dogs?"

"I don't think he really believes it," said Naomi. "I think that he quite realises that it's a gentlemanly arrangement between us, to let him off trapsing over the countryside, without his feeling that he's neglecting his duty."

They cycled to Lainsforth and stopped at a small confectioner's for ices. They were all as cheerful as usual, but there was to-day a forced note in their cheerfulness. This would probably be the last, or nearly the last, of their expeditions. Peter was leaving them, going into an unknown world. They'ld see him again but they'ld never see him again just as he was now. Things they had no part in, no knowledge of, would have gone to the making of him. It was the first break in their childhood's circle.

"It's some time since I saw old Roddy," said Peter suddenly.

"He's so busy at the factory," said Naomi, "and so tired when he gets home."

There was a note of regret in her tone. She was fond of both of them, and their drifting apart, inevitable as she knew it to be, troubled her.

"He ought to have kept up his games, you know," went on Peter. "Somehow one always loses touch with people when one doesn't meet them at games. Since he dropped out of the Lainsforth rugger club I've hardly seen him once. He belongs to the tennis club, of course, but he never turns up."

So fundamental were their differences, so unanimous their avoidance of each other, that each of the boys felt slightly uncomfortable, as if he had dropped the other.

"He's a slacker," said Naomi lightly. "He'll look you up, of course, before you go."

"Oh, I'll do the looking up," said Peter. "I've nothing to do this next fortnight but buy saucepans and riding-breeches and say good-bye to people."

"Oh, do hurry!" said Vivienne. "We must get to The Towers while the daylight lasts. I'm sure it's not the sort of thing to see by moonlight."

§

They cycled out of Lainsforth, and along the main road. And suddenly they saw it through the trees, standing on raised ground against the sky, dominating the scene.

Vivienne drew in her breath with delight.

"Oh, my dear," she gasped, "the half was not told us. Even Mrs. Tancred couldn't do it justice."

Peter looked at it, a frown upon his handsome, ingenuous face. "Well, it looks all right to me," he said.

"Oh, Peter, look at it again."

The house was a mixture of every known school of architecture. The classical, the Egyptian, the mediæval, the modern, jostled each other in a sort of nightmare confusion. Domes and turrets crowned it, balconies and gables broke out over its surface like a rash. There was a portcullis and a drawbridge and an imitation moat. It was evidently being built without regard to expense. Marble and stone, wrought iron, carved medallions, stained glass. . . .

"I'm awfully glad I've seen it before I die," said Vivienne.

"I think it's jolly fine," said Peter again.

"Oh, *Peter*!"

"Let's go up and look at it," said Naomi. "There's no one here. The workmen have all gone home. Dare we?"

"Of course," said Vivienne. "People always do. A house belongs to the passers-by till it's actually finished. Anyway, no one will see us or know."

They went up the broad drive to the front door, which stood ajar.

"We *must* go inside," said Vivienne.

They entered cautiously, but, finding the place deserted, began to examine and comment without reserve. The inside, of course, was less offensive than the outside. Despite over-elaborate cornices and mantelpieces, there was a certain dignity in the proportions of the rooms.

"But wait till he's furnished it," said Vivienne. "I'ld love to see it when he's furnished it."

Half way up the carved staircase, a stained glass window with leaded lights gave a multi-coloured view of fields that were in process of being turned into a garden.

"He'll have an ornamental pond," said Vivienne dreamily, "and a pseudo-antique temple, and he'll have statues and herbaceous borders and tropical plants all muddled up together, and he'll have a pigeon-cote without pigeons, and he'll have a conservatory with palms and a fountain and goldfish and little wicker chairs. . . . I can see it all—every detail—with the eye of faith. Come along. Let's do the first floor."

She flung open a door that led into a large room with a bay window and a balcony.

"This, ladies and gentlemen——" she began, then stopped abruptly.

A man who had been standing at the window, his hands in his pockets, wheeled round as they entered. He was tall, thick-set, and clumsily built, with stubbly,

untidy hair and blunt features. A diamond pin shone on his tie and a diamond ring on his finger. He was dressed in a rather loud shade of mauve. There could be no doubt at all that this was the owner of the property.

"We're frightfully sorry, sir," began Peter, making himself their spokesman. "We just——"

"That's all right," said the man, speaking with a thick Northern burr, "Have a look round. I don't mind."

Together with his rough, aggressive manner, was a curious underlying suggestion of shyness, almost of deprecation, as if he said, "It's all mine but I don't really know why it should be." He seemed, moreover, to welcome their presence, as if, standing in his magnificent room, gazing out over what were to be his magnificent grounds, he felt nevertheless a little lost and lonely.

"I often come here to have a look at it on Saturday afternoons when the men have gone," he said. "Have a good look round. I don't mind." He began to do the honours of the room. "Real marble, this mantelpiece. Walls going to be panelled in oak. Music-room. I'm not much of a hand at music myself. Don't know one tune from another. But still"—his rough-hewn, unfinished-looking features lost the expression of ferocity that they wore in repose and softened to a smile—"it's never too late to learn, is it?"

He turned to the window and pointed to the meadow that lay beyond the garden excavations. "I'm going to have a pond over there," he said, "boats and a little boat-house. I don't know much about boats myself but——"

He stared dreamily at the meadow as if he already saw boats and a little boat-house on his ornamental pond.

"Are you going to have a classical temple?" said Vivienne gravely.

"Yes," he said, "I'd thought of having one. They're very pretty, aren't they?"

"*Very*," agreed Vivienne, "and you really need one here to complete the effect. As it is, that's the only period unrepresented."

"I suppose the builders could rig one up all right."

"Oh, surely," said Vivienne; "it's just little pillars and a roof, you know."

"Yes. . . . There's more to think of than you'ld imagine when you build a house. For one thing, I didn't realise that a garden took so much planning. And then there's the flowers. I don't know much about flowers." He turned suddenly to Naomi. "What's your favourite flower?"

"I haven't one," she said.

"Geraniums," said Vivienne gravely, "are very beautiful. And pampas grass."

He shot her a quick glance as if aware that she was making fun of him.

"But you like flowers?" he persisted to Naomi.

"Of course."

"Well, what sort do you like best?"

"I don't think I like any sort best."

"Well, tell me one sort you like."

"Violets," she said at random.

"I shouldn't have violets," said Vivienne; "they aren't a bit showy."

"I say, we ought to be getting on," said Peter.

"It's been awfully nice of you to let us look round," said Vivienne.

"No, it hasn't," he said. "Come and look round any time you like, to see how it's getting on. It ought to be finished in another two months now. . . . Do you live near here?"

"At Deerford," said Vivienne, "the other side of Lainsforth, you know. We cycled over."

"I hope I'll see something of you when I come to live here," he said with a cumbersome courtesy that sat oddly upon his bull-like frame and prize-fighter countenance.

"We hope so too," said Vivienne. "We'ld love to see it furnished. I'm sure it will be simply gorgeous when it's furnished."

They took leave of him and left him standing at the window again, looking down upon his imaginary gardens. . . .

§

"Vivienne, you were dreadful," said Naomi when they reached the road and their bicycles.

"But, my dear, wasn't he a darling? Dressed in purple and simply ablaze with diamonds. 'I'm not much of a hand at music,'" she quoted, imitating his North country burr. "I'm so glad he's come. Life's going to be much brighter for all of us."

"He seemed quite a decent sort of chap to me," said Peter in his stolid, unemotional voice.

They began to cycle back towards Lainsforth. Naomi was silent. As a background to all her thoughts and feelings all that afternoon had been that vague, nagging anxiety about Roddy—Roddy up in his room, nerve-wracked, working frenziedly but without hope, driven by the mysterious power that urged him . . . Roddy . . . Roddy's father. . . . It was so ununderstandable, that people should feel the urge of creation and yet lack the power to create . . . artists maimed and frustrated . . . there must be thousands of them.

"I loved his tie," Vivienne was saying. "It was red spots on grey—like a plaice. He's simply angelic."

"Who?" said Naomi, then remembering, "Oh—him."

She spoke almost impatiently. The memory of the man they had just left obtruded upon her thought of Roddy like a desecration. She closed her eyes, as if to shut away the memory of him, and, when she opened them, Roddy was alone again.

Vivienne dismounted outside a bookshop in Lainsforth.

"I've got to get some books," she said, "and I shall probably be here till closing-time, so don't wait for me."

They rode on in silence. Peter was wondering if Vivienne guessed and were trying to help him. For weeks past, whenever he'd thought of going abroad, it had been the thought of leaving Naomi that had hurt most unbearably, but it wasn't till this afternoon that he'd realised suddenly and without a shadow of doubt that he loved her. The realisation had flashed upon him when he came out to the lawn, and saw her sitting on the grass with Vivienne at his mother's feet, her red lips parted in a smile, her cheeks aglow, a strand of her cloudy brown hair blown across her eyes. . . . He'd known her nearly all his life and he'd loved her ever since he'd known her, loved her so deeply that he hadn't realised till now what his love meant.

He looked at her as she cycled by him along the dusty country road, her warm gipsy beauty, her firm young body, her brown eyes, soft and fearless like the eyes of a wild animal, her teeth startlingly white against her brown skin when she smiled.

Her eyes now were fixed dreamily on the distance. What was she thinking of? Was it possible that . . .? But, of course, one couldn't propose on a bicycle on the

high road. They were passing the lane that went down to the railway bridge.

"Let's come down here, Naomi. Just to the bridge. We always used to come here in the old days. Do you remember?"

She hesitated. She wanted to get back to Roddy. Her anxiety about Roddy was like a tight band pressing round her heart. Then she remembered that these were Peter's last days at home. . . . She smiled at him.

"All right," she said, "but I ought to be getting back. They'll wonder what's happened to me."

In silence they rode down the narrow lane to the bridge, and then dismounted.

"The express has gone, you know," said Naomi, "and the other trains don't make half so much noise. . . ."

"We had some quite jolly times," said Peter, with a vague idea of leading up to it. One couldn't blurt it out at once. One must lead up to it. . . .

"Yes, you and I and Vee and Roddy. And we used to creep down the road behind the hedge so that Lily shouldn't see us."

"It's ages since I've seen anything of old Roddy," said Peter again.

"Roddy used to be really frightened of the noise, you know. He's always hated noise. He hates it in the factory."

Warm and dusky and desirable, her brown eyes soft and velvety under the shade of her hat, her red lips parted in a faint smile, showing her white regular teeth. He stood very near her, looking down at her. Her skin had always reminded him of a ripe apricot, gipsy brown and rose. There was a tiny mole near her mouth that he'd always loved. When she smiled, faint dimples appeared in the smooth cheeks. He abandoned his attempt to "lead up to it."

"Naomi," he said, "will you marry me?"

Her smile faded, and dismay flashed into her face.

"Oh, Peter!"

"You don't love me?" he said bluntly.

"Of course I love you, Peter. I've always loved you. But not that way. Not enough to marry you."

"I know. I don't think I ever really—hoped. The thought of going out there to make a home for you was—too wonderful to be true. I never really let myself believe it. I'm not—good enough for you."

"Oh, Peter, don't. It's not that."

There was a silence, and then she said slowly and dreamily: "I don't think I shall ever marry, Peter."

"Why not?"

"I can't imagine myself ever loving anyone more than I love Roddy, and you must love a man better than your brother before you can marry him, mustn't you?"

"Yes. . . ."

"I love Roddy so much that I'ld let myself be cut into little pieces if it would do him any good. I suppose it's—being part of the same family that makes me feel like that. But all brothers and sisters don't, do they?"

"No. . . . There's—no hope, Naomi?"

She shook her head.

"No."

"If ever you—change your mind—I don't suppose you will but if ever you do—you'll write to me, won't you? Or if ever I can help you, let me know. I'll come over at once if ever you want me."

She smiled at him mistily.

"You've always mended my bicycle punctures, haven't you? Roddy's hopeless at anything like that. Shall I send for you from Africa to mend my punctures?"

"If you really wanted me to, I'ld come."

"I know you would, Peter. I *do* love you. I feel that you're a real friend. Only I don't want to marry you. You do understand, don't you?"

"Yes. . . ."

"And it means a lot to me to feel that I've got your friendship. It feels as it must feel to a tight-rope walker to know that there's a net just underneath to catch him if he falls. If things ever go awfully wrong with me, I'll hold you to your promise. And I'll think of you every day and write to you once a week."

He smiled rather a twisted smile.

"Say once a month. Once a week's too often. You'll forget. And I shall be living for your letters."

"Oh, don't do that, Peter. I write such terribly dull ones. Once at school I forgot to post my Sunday letter to mother. I found it in my writing-case on the Wednesday and told the head mistress, and she was afraid that mother would be worrying and wired to her, and mother had never even realised that I hadn't written."

"Well, don't try it on with me. It'll be me that'll do the wiring. . . . And, Naomi, if ever you—change your mind, even if it's years hence, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Oh, Peter, you'll have a nice little wife of your own out there in a year or two."

"No, I shan't. I shall never want anyone but you. I shall be waiting for you. Always——"

"I wonder. . . . I hope not."

A train lumbered over the bridge, filling it with reverberating sound. Naomi clapped her hands to her ears.

"It's almost as bad as it used to be, even though it isn't the express. . . ."

She smiled at him, thinking that only Peter would have proposed under a railway bridge.

"May I kiss you?" he said suddenly. "Perhaps I won't see you alone again before I go."

"Yes."

He took her in his arms and strained her to him, kissing her passionately upon the lips. She lay inert in his embrace. His passion didn't waken the faintest echo in her.

When he released her, his face was white and set. Pity for him stirred intolerably at her heart.

The sun had set and the bridge was in darkness. She looked round and seemed to see four children watching her in the shadows—Roddy and Vivienne and Peter and herself. They looked at her reproachfully because she was being unkind to Peter. She felt suddenly tired and cold.

"Let's go, Peter," she said.

They walked in silence up the lane, to the road.

"It's after lighting-up time," said Naomi when they reached the road. "I've lost my lamp. Have you got yours?"

"Yes, but there's no oil in it. We'll have to get off if we meet Buggins."

They mounted, and began to cycle along the dimly-lit country road towards the little group of trees that marked the Church and Hall and Vicarage. Buggins, the village constable, was standing just in front of the Red Lion. They dismounted when they saw him, and walked their bicycles past him, bidding him good night. Once past him, they mounted again and rode on. Buggins saw them dismount and mount again, but he considered honour to be satisfied by their walking past him. That had been their tacit understanding with him from childhood.

At the gate of the Hall they dismounted again.

"Good night, Peter," said Naomi.

"Naomi——" he began passionately, but she had vanished into the dim shadows of the drive.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER IX

She put her bicycle into the shed, and entered the house by the side door. The drawing-room was empty. She ran swiftly up the stairs to Roddy's room and knocked. He opened the door and stood there looking at her. Despite the lines of exhaustion under them, his eyes shone brightly, and there was an air of exhilaration and excitement about him.

"I'm just coming down," he said, going out into the passage with her and closing the door behind him.

He didn't want her to see his work. As he worked, there had come to him a blinding flash of inspiration, a sudden intoxicating knowledge that his work was good. He clung to the knowledge, but he didn't really trust it. He was afraid that, should anyone else's eyes, even Naomi's, look at what he had done, the knowledge would fade away.

They went downstairs to the little morning-room that opened off the hall, a cosy homely little room with a deep window-seat and a round table in the middle, covered by a serge cloth.

The heavy weight of anxiety had dropped from Naomi's heart as soon as she saw the shining exaltation of his face.

"How has it gone, Roddy?" she said.

She had pulled off her hat and thrown it on the window-seat beside her.

"Marvellous," he said softly. "It's probably putrid but the doing of it's been heaven."

"I'm so glad. . . . Where's mother?"

"She's gone to bed. She's got a headache. I'm afraid I upset her at lunch. I told her I was sorry, and she was awfully nice about it. She told me about father. I may be just the same, but—I can't help it. I can't even blame him. She doesn't understand. If you've got to do things, you've got to. If someone who really knew came to me and told me definitely and finally that the stuff I'm doing will never be any good, I'ld chuck it up for about two days, then I'ld go back to it, not because I wanted to but because I *had* to. . . . I know just what he felt. She doesn't understand. Probably he *knew* his stuff wasn't any good, just as I know that mine isn't, but he *had* to go on. . . . She was disappointed in the way I took it. I think she felt as if I was standing with father against her."

"She loved him," said Naomi. "And she loves you . . . terribly."

"She says I'll get to like the factory. I don't want to get to like the factory. I'm sticking it and I'm going to stick it, but I'd rather die than get to like it. I *should* be dead—all the real part of me—if I got to like a hell of noise and money-grubbing like that. . . ."

"Oh, Roddy, don't think of it. Don't look ahead. Just be happy for to-night."

"I am happy, Namy. When it comes, it's—worth all the hell one goes through other times. . . . I'ld never talk to anyone else like this. You understand so. You make me a self-centred posing ass."

Now that she was with him, all the events of the afternoon—even Peter's proposal—seemed dim and unreal.

"It's late," she said, smiling up at him. "I must go and change."

"Don't let's have a stodgy indoor meal, Namy. Mother's not coming down. Let's do something. Take

me vagabonding with you. Were you going vagabonding to-night?"

There were still nights when she couldn't stay indoors, when she went roaming over the countryside at the old mysterious compulsion. Imogen had long since stopped trying to prevent her.

She shook her head.

"No, not to-night."

"No, you never go vagabonding on nights that other people would like to be out—nice, dry, moonlight nights. You always choose the sort of night when decent people want to be indoors. Thunderstorms for preference. Of course you'ld scorn to-night. There isn't a wind and it's warm and dry and the moon's coming up."

She laughed.

"I'll come if you want to, Roddy. I'ld love to. Let's have a moonlight picnic in the Happy Valley. . . . I'll go and pack a basket."

"I'll help you. I'm awfully good at spreading the insides of sandwiches. You cut the bread and I'll spread the insides."

He was excited, eager, radiant. All the black unhappiness of the past few weeks had left him. She revelled in his serenity, knowing how precarious it was.

§

The Happy Valley was bathed in moonlight. The little stream that rippled through the folds and hollows of it was a stream of molten silver. The shadows on the hillside were giant blots of ink.

They sat down on a flat rock by the side of the stream.

"We used to come here a lot when we were kids, didn't we?" said Roddy. "You and Vee and Peter

and I. . . . What sort of a time did you have this afternoon, Naomi? I am a self-centred old beast."

"It was all right. After tea, Peter and Vee and I cycled over to see that house that somebody called Belson is building. Just beyond Lainsforth. Did you know about it?"

"I've heard vaguely. What was it like?"

"Dreadful. He was there. He spoke to us and Vee was awful. She ragged him to his face."

"What's he like?"

Naomi shivered. It was horrible somehow even to think of him with Roddy's face, clean cut and fine and sensitive, before her in the moonlight.

"Oh, Roddy, he's terrible. Terrible. I can't possibly describe him. Bloated." Even as she said the word she knew that it was unjust. "Bloated and over-dressed. Diamond rings and a diamond tie-pin. He said that he hoped to see something of us when he came to live there."

"Well, forewarned is forearmed. I wondered where on earth you'd been."

"Vee stopped in Lainsforth because she had to buy some books. Peter and I came on. We went down to the bridge on the way."

"Why ever?"

"Oh, I think that Peter's beginning to feel a bit sentimental about things now that he's going away."

"Is Peter in love with you, Naomi?" he said suddenly.

She hesitated, then said:

"Yes. He asked me to marry him."

"What beastly cheek!"

Roddy's voice was sharp and indignant, as though Peter's proposal were a personal insult to him.

"Oh, Roddy, it wasn't."

"I hope you turned him down."

"I did, but I *am* fond of him. Not fond enough to marry him, but really fond of him."

"My dear girl, he's all brawn and no brain."

"Darling, you're all brain and no brawn."

"Oh, I know he thinks I'm an effeminate ass."

"I told him that I didn't think I'ld ever marry because I couldn't imagine myself loving anyone better than you."

He laughed, amused and pleased.

"We won't marry, Namy, either of us. We'll live in a cottage and have a dog and a cat and a parrot."

"You're laughing at it, Roddy, but I mean it. I'm serious. You're—part of me somehow. I can't bear the thought of losing you. If you marry I shall hate your wife. . . . Something seems to join us so that we aren't separate people at all. I suppose that it's what people call the bond of kinship, but—all brothers and sisters don't feel it. Vee doesn't mind Peter going as much as I'ld mind you going. . . ."

He wasn't listening to her. He was looking at a slender silver birch that stood a few yards away, swaying so slightly in the moonlight that it seemed to be sighing in its sleep. A lock of his dark hair lay across his white brow and his eyes gleamed. He seemed part of the moonlight—shadow and glinting light, magic and enchantment.

"I wish I were a painter and could paint it," he whispered, "just bent that tiny fraction to show that it's moving, with its shadow there in the moonlight and the hills and rocks all round. Like a lost princess. It's a miracle, you know, being able to suggest motion by something static. I can't do it yet. I shall before I've finished, though." His mood of radiant self-confidence was still upon him. "You know, Naomi, I want my work to be symbolic. The idea of reproducing the actual material object is wrong. However much selection you

exercise, it's cramping . . . irksome. You can't put anything of your own self—your soul and spirit—into it. It may result in beauty but it's stilted beauty . . . material beauty. An artist should express things that are deeper and truer than anything material. You see, art isn't material. . . . It isn't just an affair of plaster or bronze or paint skilfully used—the ' wonderful likeness ' idea, you know. Art is a thing of the spirit and it should be used to express things of the spirit. . . . "

Roddy's eager young voice hardly seemed to break the deep silence of the silver valley. The moonlight flooded it more deeply, as the moon rose higher.

" It's like a silver balloon," said Naomi dreamily, looking up at it.

" It's a world," he said, " and there are millions of other worlds all about us. . . . People in other worlds sitting and looking at this one and wondering what's in it and thinking how bright it is."

She shivered and drew nearer him.

" It's all so big. It's terrifying," she said.

" Yes . . . but little things are more terrifying, really. The muscles in the joint of an insect's leg, for instance. I think that's much more terrifying than the solar system."

She spoke dreamily.

" When I was small I used to pretend I was a sort of giant looking down at the world and seeing people as tiny, tiny dots like insects."

" You always were a queer kid. . . . What about supper ? "

She took out the sandwiches and the thermos and they picnicked there beside the stream. The distant church clock struck twelve.

" The world's asleep, Roddy," whispered Naomi. " You can almost hear it breathing. . . . "

"I'm glad you turned Peter down."

"I'm never going to marry."

"I won't either. That's a bargain. We'll stick together and end up as a nice old couple in a cottage in the country. We'll talk about old times as we drink our gruel in the evenings."

"Yes. . . . Isn't it funny to think that every moment one lives becomes 'old times' almost as soon as one's lived it. Goes off to join all the others in the past. Even this—you and me and the valley and the moonlight—will only be a memory to-morrow. I wonder how these days will seem to us when we're the nice old couple in our country cottage drinking gruel?"

"They'll probably seem completely different to each of us. One never remembers things as they really were, and no two people ever have just the same memories of the same thing. Memory's an artist, you know, and it selects what it needs to paint the sort of picture it wants."

"You're getting very philosophical, Roddy. It must be the moonlight. Let's go home."

"No, let's stay to see the sunrise."

"No, darling. We'ld be so tired and cross to-morrow and mother would hate it so. She hates my vagabonding, anyway."

"Yes. . . . I remember your fighting her like a little tiger once when she tried to stop you going."

"She didn't understand. I *had* to go. Even if I'd be *killed* for it I had to go out."

"It was pouring cats and dogs."

"It's as if I belonged to something outside," she said slowly, "and had to go to it whenever it called me."

"I used to try to understand that part of you, but I gave it up long ago. There's nothing of it in me, you know. I prefer to watch storms from behind a window."

§

They walked home along the moonlit lanes. Once the moonlight picked out a pair of eyes in the hedgerow that gleamed suddenly through the shadows, and once something scuttled in sudden terror across their path.

"It's been great, Namy," whispered Roddy as they crept into the hall. "We must do it again. Remember . . . we're neither of us going to marry. I'll have the dog and you can have the cat and the parrot. . . . Are you sleeping out or in?"

"Out. It's quite warm at nights still."

She always slept out till the frost came.

"I'll undress upstairs," she said, "and get out of my window. It disturbs mother less than the door."

She kept a mattress and coverlets in the summer-house at the end of the garden. She often let herself down from her bedroom window by the pipe when she was ready for bed. It annoyed Imogen to hear her going down the stairs and opening the door. Imogen had long ceased to make objection to her sleeping out, but she hated to be reminded of it.

"Good night, Roddy," she said.

He smiled at her. His mood of excitement and exhilaration was still upon him.

"Good night, you gipsy," he said.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER X

NAOMI was surprised to find how much she missed Peter. She received letters from him by every mail—stilted little letters recounting baldly what he had done since he last wrote. Impersonal as they were, they seemed to bring

him vividly before her—dependable, loyal, courageous, starkly honest. He had never been able to spell correctly, and the badly spelt words filled Naomi with a sort of yearning pity for him.

Vivienne was at Cambridge, and Naomi now went into Lainsforth every morning to a Commercial College where she learnt typing and shorthand. She had tried to discuss her plans with Imogen, but that nebulous drawing nearer to Imogen, of which she had been conscious after leaving school, had ceased. Since their conversation about Roddy on the day of the Vicarage party, Imogen had been remote and unapproachable. Even with Roddy she was hardly less reserved and aloof. She showed her love for him involuntarily, in her eyes when they rested on him, in the tones of her voice when she spoke to him. Roddy, on his side, was hurt by her hostility to his modelling, and had turned to Naomi for sympathy. Naomi felt dully unhappy, for though she supported Roddy with whole-hearted loyalty, the old love for Imogen—a love tinged with bitterness and resentment—still tugged at her heart.

"My dear, you must do as you like," Imogen had said when Naomi told her that she wanted to take a course in secretarial work and earn her own living.

"You've no objection?" Naomi had said, trying as she had tried in her childhood to force Imogen's interest. Though the attempt had never met with anything but failure, she couldn't resist making it even now.

"I? Of course not."

"You see, you don't need me here and I must do something. Besides—you said we weren't well off."

"We aren't so poor that it's necessary for you to earn your own living."

"No . . . but I want to do something. The classes are in the mornings. I shall have the afternoons free."

"It sounds a splendid arrangement," said Imogen, with the mechanical brightness with which one agrees to a child's plan. Then, just as Naomi was turning to go from the panelled drawing-room, she said suddenly:

"Oh . . . Naomi."

"Yes?"

Naomi wheeled round. It was strange to see Imogen embarrassed, at a loss what to say.

"Naomi. You hear from Peter, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Is he—fond of you?"

"Yes."

"Has he asked you to marry him?"

It spoke eloquently of their estrangement that Naomi had never told Imogen of Peter's proposal.

"Yes."

"And you—— ?"

"I don't love him."

Imogen fidgeted with one of the ornaments on the mantelpiece, then she spoke in that new hesitating, embarrassed fashion.

"But, my dear—are you sure? You seem to me—so —completely suited to each other."

Naomi had gone abruptly from the room. She went to her bedroom and, standing at the window, gazed unseeingly with stormy brows over the peaceful sun-bathed countryside.

"So she hates me as much as that," she said. "She hates me as much as that. . . "

§

She missed Vivienne. It was the first time that she'd been at home without Vivienne. During their school-days she'd come home from school and gone back to

school at the same time as Vivienne. Their holidays had seldom overlapped except for a day or two. Naomi was reserved, and had made few friends at school. She had a fierce love of freedom, a terror of being possessed, that made her shun intimacies. When any of her classmates had attempted to form one of the usual schoolgirl friendships with her, a curious sensation as if someone were stifling her, would come over her, and she would jerk brusquely away from the proffered friendship. She had been generally considered rather "queer." Her school life had seemed unreal to her. Only the holidays had seemed real, the Hall, the Vicarage, Roddy, Vivienne and—the two Imogens, the Imogen of her dreams, for whom she longed all the term, and the real Imogen, who was aloof and indifferent, but who became the dream Imogen again as soon as she'd left her.

She was naturally a passionate child, but she was also proud and sensitive, and she had early learnt to hide behind a barrier of "ordinariliness," to conform with convention in speech and manner. The most sensitive children always learn that the first.

Vivienne wrote to her weekly from College. It was all most "entertaining," according to Vivienne. Her letters were sketches of her contemporaries and the dons, clever, amusing, and sometimes slightly malicious. Vivienne didn't throw herself into the life of College. She stood apart from it, cool, critical, amused, watching. She too made no close friends, for she too disliked intimacies. It was their reserve, and the recognition in each of the reserve of the other, that was the basis of the friendship between the two girls.

Naomi always took Vivienne's letters over to the Vicarage for the Vicar and his wife to read. They were tremendously proud of Vivienne, though the

Vicar was sometimes slightly dismayed by the trenchant little character sketches.

"She mustn't begin to look out for the bad in people," he said. "It's not Christian, and it grows on one."

Naomi often met him—a shabby stooping figure—tramping over the downs or through the village to one of his scattered parishioners. There was always about him that curious suggestion of radiant happiness that had nothing to do with his circumstances, the events of his daily life. He always stopped to speak to her and to tease her as if she were still a little girl. He had given up his Hebrew lessons. The son of a farmer—a boy of sixteen—wanted to take Orders, and the Vicar was coaching him for his Matric. The boy was earnest but slow, and, instead of studying Hebrew, the Vicar now taught him in the evenings, after his day's work—gentle, cheerful, immeasurably patient.

§

Naomi was working hard at the Commercial College, but it seemed as unreal to her as her school had done. Her beauty brought her attentions from the men students, but she didn't even recognise them as attentions. Everything was part of an alien world. She'ld have been surprised to know that she was called "standoffish." One youth went too far. He met her coming into Lainsforth and, walking with her, foolishly slipped his arm round her waist. She turned on him with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes, drawing herself to her full height, and the youth turned and fled incontinently down the road. Her anger faded as soon as he had vanished. She felt no anger against the youth. Only the touch of his arm had

brought on her the blind terror of intimacy, of being possessed. . . .

She still loved the downs with a love that seemed somehow connected with her love for Roddy. No day passed without her walking there, and on no two days was it the same. Its beauty was inexhaustible. She loved to look down at the valley—the trees, the cottages, the river in the distance like a cord of silver—but she didn't like to walk in the valley. It made her feel oppressed. It was only up on the downs that she felt free, herself, that she had the curious sense of unity with the earth and all that belonged to it that was one of her earliest memories. It was on the downs that those moments of heightened vision most often visited her, those moments when the world was suddenly bathed in an unearthly beauty.

Sometimes—very occasionally—Roddy came with her, but the external world meant little to Roddy. It was never touched with magic for him as it was for Naomi.

§

Sometimes Roddy arrived home from his work so weary and nerve-wracked that he hit out viciously at both his mother and Naomi; sometimes he seemed numb and listless; sometimes blackly heavily miserable; and sometimes alight with that fire and radiance that Naomi knew was inspiration. Imogen didn't understand. She would say to Naomi then:

"He's beginning to like the work, you see. I knew he would."

He always went up to his room to work when he came in. Often Naomi would go up to sit with him. Her presence never jarred on him. She would sit on a low

stool by his book-shelves reading. Her presence was a voiceless consolation, keeping at bay his depression, inspiring him. Imogen never came up to his room. Each was bitterly hurt by the other's attitude to his work. Roddy thought . . . " She can't really love me or she'ld understand . . . " and Imogen thought . . . " He can't really love me or he'ld understand."

Cousin Geraldine came to the Hall occasionally for flying visits—smart and hard and tinkling and breathless, as if from trying to do too many things in too short a time. She always seemed to bring a jarring modern atmosphere into the old house.

" Oh, my dear, haven't you read it? It's *frightfully* clever. Everyone's reading it. I must send you a copy . . . She's *marvellous* in this new thing. She's acting with Dennis Mallett. They say she's living with him. George Mercer? Oh, my dear, she divorced him last year. . . . I went to the private view. Dora Green was there in a most *wonderful* dress. I don't know how she does it. Her husband left her practically nothing. They say that she . . . I don't believe it, of course, but I do wonder where she gets her money from. It was very disappointing this year. No really good portraits . . . a lot of new decadent stuff. I want to get over to Cannes next month before the season's over. Everyone seems to be there now."

She gave you the impression of taking part in a breathless race. And she talked continually in her hard, bright, metallic voice. Her talking wasn't an expression of herself. It *was* herself. She only did things in order to talk about them. She read the latest book, she went to the latest plays, she saw the latest exhibition, she attended all the fashionable functions, in order to talk about them. She wouldn't have read the greatest masterpiece of the world, unless it happened to have been just

published and so make a good dinner-table topic. She talked well, and was generally considered a cultured and interesting woman. She had a knack of picking up the jargon in any particular field, and there were few things on which she couldn't pose as an expert. Her husband had left her well off, but she lived always just beyond her means. She had pitied Imogen sincerely when Imogen's husband had wrecked his fortune, but it had never occurred to her to do more than pity her. She was an incorrigibly selfish woman. Even now when she was hard up she would let her town flat and come down to the Hall to " recuperate."

Naomi disliked her intensely, and was glad that Roddy, too, disliked her, though Cousin Geraldine flattered Roddy, and laid herself out to please him. She made no attempt to please Naomi, and there was always that cold light of amusement in her eyes when she looked at her, that Naomi remembered from childhood.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XI

VILLAGE gossip was still busy with the building of The Towers.

" My dear," said Mrs. Tancred to Mrs. Fuller, " they say he's having an iron staircase painted to look like bamboo. He went to the Pavilion the last time he was in Brighton and admired it immensely. He's having marble pillars and a marble floor in the hall. Palms everywhere, of course. He'll have to have a reception office in the hall or it will look so unfinished." And Mrs. Fuller replied, " They say it's costing a fortune," which, she told herself, was neither unkind nor untrue,

nor, on the whole, unnecessary, for one must say *something*.

The Towers had become a standing jest, and absurd details were freely manufactured by the local wits. Mrs. Darrent was probably the only person who wasn't amused by it.

She smiled her eager happy smile and said :

"But if he likes things like that, why shouldn't he have them? I'm sure he's worked hard enough."

Mr. Darrent was quite certainly the only person who knew nothing about it. Doubtless he heard references to it, but he was so busy with his scattered parish, his services, his classes, his clubs, and his coaching, that they passed him by. And people who'd thought it excruciatingly funny a moment ago, weren't quite so sure with the Vicar's electric blue eyes upon them. Not quite the sort of joke the poor old buffer could appreciate anyway. So they talked about something else till he'd gone.

§

Vivienne, red-haired, shrewd, humorous, with her cynical mockery and gamin grin, came home for the vacation. She came with flying colours. She'd won a prize that was usually won only by students in their last year. The Vicar was prouder than ever of her. He told everyone about it. His pride in Vivienne seemed to be his one human weakness. And Vivienne said to Naomi :

"What am I going to do with it all anyway? I couldn't endure to teach, and I won't let him spend any more money on me when I leave College. . . . I meant to do frightfully badly this term, because I wanted him to look on me as a human being, but I couldn't when it came to the point. I can't resist bluffing the old idiots.

It's rather fun, you know, making them think you know a lot when you don't. And it's all a knack. I picked it up young. . . . Lord, it's nice to be back."

"But you like being there, Vee?"

"I hate communities of women. They're either mutual admiration societies or cat fights. Darling, I'll show you a few of my pet specimens."

Her mimicry, with its subtle touch of exaggeration, was more skilful than ever. Naomi saw her "specimens," heard them, felt that she had known them all their lives. Impossible to realise that this was Vee, Vee all the time and in all of them. She'd felt just like that, of course, in their childhood, when Vivienne used to impersonate the "customers" of "the shop."

"Vee, you're a genius."

"Of course I am, darling. Do you know, I've decided quite definitely on my future career. I'm going to entertain pit queues. I'ld enjoy it far more than teaching. I think it would be a thrilling life. All the queuites watching you with one eye, and reading *John Bull* with the other, and suddenly reading it frenziedly with both as soon as you start going round with the hat. I'ld be one of those who stand immovable by each one and hypnotise them with my eye till they put a penny in. Then I'ld have to dash off when the man who tears paper comes, and I'ld fly to the next queue and wait till the man who does farmyard noises has finished. I'm sure I could live on it, and I know I'ld enjoy it, and what more can one ask of life?"

Despite her cynicism there was a vitality about Vivienne that communicated itself to Naomi, making her suddenly feel younger and more alive than she had felt since she left school.

Living with Roddy and Imogen in the quiet old house, brooding over her relationship with each of them, she

had in the last few months grown older than her years. Vivienne's bright hard *insouciance*, her clean acrid gaiety, was the antidote she needed. Vivienne liked to extend her repertoire as far as possible. She took a keen interest in Naomi's fellow-students at the Commercial College, especially in Cissie Clements, an ultra-genteel young lady of the "refained" type. She was very attentive to Cissie, asking her opinion on all sorts of questions, and Cissie, flattered by her interest, soared to sublime heights, especially on the subject of love, courtship and marriage, on which she was an authority in her own circle. Vivienne was serious and painstaking over her representations, working conscientiously at each detail, till she was quite satisfied. She would say to Naomi, "Is that better?" and Naomi would say, "How *can* you keep serious over it?"

"But it doesn't amuse me a bit," protested Vivienne. "I love doing it, but it doesn't amuse me. I feel as if I were painting a portrait, and had to get it just right. I *adore* Cissie because she's such a good sitter."

Cissie herself was tremendously proud of Vivienne's attentions, and made frequent reference to her as "my greet friend, a clargyman's darter who's won scholar-sheeps."

§

On the last day of the vacation Naomi and Vivienne went for a long walk over the downs. Vivienne was unusually silent. Suddenly she said:

"Mother had a letter from Moireen Silver this morning. She wants to come and stay here."

"Moireen?"

"Oh, I forgot. She used to be Elsie."

Elsie . . . Naomi remembered a fair-haired beautiful

child whom she had once met at the Vicarage, a distant cousin of Vivienne's who had come over for the day. She had made them feel clumsy and childish somehow. She hadn't wanted to play games, and had preferred the company of the grown-ups to that of the children.

"She changed her name to Moireen," Vivienne was saying, "because Elsie was too ordinary for her. Did I never tell you? I suppose I didn't because it made no impression on me. She's somehow never seemed real to me."

"Is she coming to stay at the Vicarage?"

"Yes. I haven't seen her for years. Her people are dead and she hasn't any money, but she seems to have a pretty gay time. She's got an endless array of friends and relations, and she's much in demand. I'm not quite sure why she's coming to us. We're not much in her line, I should imagine. She says she's longing to see us again but I rather gather that she's suddenly stranded between two invitations and falls back on us. She's always kept us by her as a last resource. She writes charming letters to mother every Christmas. She sent a photograph last year. She's still the *Pears' Annual* presentation picture type."

"Vee, darling, don't be catty."

"I'm not. Only mother's such a duck, and I don't want her to be exploited. I've always had a prejudice against Elsie-Moireen. Of course, it may be jealousy. She's an antipathetic type. In some ways I'm sorry that I'm going to miss her, because I think that she's rather an interesting specimen. . . . Only, darling . . ."

"Yes?"

"I want you to keep an eye on mother, and not let her be put on, will you?"

"I'll try to."

"I'm glad that Peter's not at home, because I think

that to the male she's quite irresistible. Keep an eye on Roddy too ! "

" Roddy simply doesn't *see* people. Besides, Roddy and I have taken an oath never to marry. We're going to live in a cottage with a dog and a cat and a parrot."

§

Moireen arrived a fortnight later. She came over to the Hall to pay her respects to Imogen almost immediately, and Naomi, coming home from her work, found Imogen and Moireen and Cousin Geraldine having tea together in the white panelled drawing-room.

Moireen's prettiness was the sort that took your breath away. She was slight and graceful, with appealing childish eyes and mouth, a flawless skin, and a mop of ash-blonde curls that looked striking in an age of long hair. She had cut off her hair, because, she said, she " couldn't be bothered with it," but really, her friends suspected, in order to show the classic shape of the small head and the delicious outline of the tender nape. She carried herself with an air of childish dignity that was irresistible, as if she were an exquisite child playing at being grown up.

She ran across the room to Naomi as soon as she saw her.

" Oh, Naomi, how *lovely* to see you ! I've thought about you such a lot."

You couldn't help being touched and pleased just at first, before you realised that she was like that with everyone.

She was charmingly attentive to Imogen throughout tea, and Imogen, responding, lost her air of weary aloofness, became animated, almost vivacious, talking

more unreservedly than Naomi had ever heard her talk before. They discovered friends in common—the children of people whom Imogen had known when she lived in London before her marriage. Moireen seemed to have an extensive circle of acquaintances. Her normal life seemed to consist in a round of visits to well-known country houses, with an occasional season in town. Her mother had been well connected, and it was clear that she cultivated the connection assiduously. Her own income was sufficient for her clothes and personal needs. For the rest she looked to the connections. They had paid for her schooling, and she had spent her holidays, sometimes with one, sometimes with another. None of them had adopted her, but they were generous of invitations. She was much in demand at big parties, and, beneath her easy charm, her shining air of childishness, was extraordinarily sophisticated for her years.

Cousin Geraldine surrendered to the charm at once, nodding her head and tinkling approvingly. This child knew the right people, went to the right places, used the right jargon. She could talk on any subject, in a pretty, deprecating, hesitating way that became her youth, as convincingly as Cousin Geraldine herself and with as little knowledge. The current judgments on contemporary books and people and plays tripped slickly off her tongue. You needn't have read the book, you needn't have seen the play, you needn't know the people. So long as you knew the right thing to say about them, that was all that mattered. Cousin Geraldine seemed to tick off opinions, people, places, with the air of one member of a secret society recognising another.

Moireen was eagerly interested in Imogen, questioning her about her life at Deerford, with a touch of diffidence that was charming.

"The house looks so *lovely*. It's so quiet and peaceful and dignified and beautiful. Houses in town never look like that. It makes one wonder why anyone ever lives in town."

Naomi thought: She'ld just as easily say, "It makes one wonder why anyone ever lives in the country. . . ." She says just what she thinks you'ld like to hear.

"One gets used to it," said Imogen. "I love the country though I'm not a walker like Naomi. It's the garden I love. There's always something to do. That's what town people can't understand."

"I'm sure there is. Even in the winter. Winter's so fresh and clean in the country. It's tired and dirty in the town. The town never *sees* clean snow, does it? Do tell me about your garden. I'm so much interested in gardens."

Imogen began—almost eagerly for Imogen—to describe the arrangement of her garden, and Naomi, watching Moireen, thought: She isn't a bit interested in gardens. She'ld be just as ready to say to someone else that she was bored by gardens. She hasn't got any self at all. She's just what she thinks the other person wants her to be. Probably when she is alone she vanishes into nothing.

Then she took herself to task. She mustn't be catty. Moireen was charming. If only one didn't have that curious impression of her standing apart from her charm, as it were, watching it like an artist, adding a touch here, a touch there . . .

I'm jealous, she told herself, because she can make Mother—like that with her, and I can't, and because I'm afraid that Roddy will like her.

§

Then Roddy came in from his work. He looked nervy and exhausted, his sensitive lips set, blue shadows beneath his eyes.

"You remember Moireen, don't you?" said his mother.

He looked at her without smiling.

"I remember Elsie," he said at last.

Though the girl's expression of wistful sweetness did not alter, Naomi had a sudden knowledge that the reference to her change of name had enraged her.

"She changed it," said Imogen, "didn't you, dear?"

"It was silly of me," said Moireen, smiling. "I'm ashamed of it. I was at that ridiculous romantic stage that one goes through in one's teens and I changed it to Moireen."

"I've never heard the name Moireen before," said Roddy.

His mother threw him a reproving glance, but he ignored it. He was tired and his nerves were on edge, and he was annoyed at finding a visitor there.

The girl laughed—her sweet, childish, deprecating laugh.

"I think I made it up," she said.

"Well, if you don't like it why not go back to your real name?"

"She can't, Roddy," put in Imogen quickly. "Everyone knows her as Moireen now. I think it's pretty and it suits her."

"Let's all change our names," said Roddy. "I'll be Montmorency and you be Eglantine, Naomi."

Imogen, ignoring him, began to ask Moireen about her visit to Italy. Moireen had mentioned that a distant relation had taken her there in the spring.

"It was our first visit to Rome," said Moireen. "We had a lovely time. We didn't do any of the touristy things or go to any of the touristy places."

"Why not?" said Roddy. "Presumably the touristy things and places are the ones that are of most interest. I mean, does it necessarily prove one's superiority not to like the things the majority of people like?"

"I never go abroad," put in Imogen quickly. "I'm hopelessly insular."

"Oh, so am I *really*," said Moireen. "I love England. It thrills me to come back to it. Coming back is after all the nicest part of going away."

Switching round from one opinion to another. Always saying what you wanted to hear, her eyes so big and candid, her mouth so childish and appealing. You'ld believe her even if you heard her contradict herself almost in the same breath. Though her serenity seemed undisturbed, Naomi could tell that Roddy's openly displayed hostility troubled her. She did not speak to him, confining herself to Imogen and Cousin Geraldine, but she turned to him the lovely lines of her profile, and the little trill of laughter with which she received Cousin Geraldine's dry jokes was, Naomi knew, for him.

Roddy put down his cup abruptly and went from the room with a muttered apology, and Naomi followed him a few minutes later.

She found him in his room gazing out of the window, his hands in his pockets.

He turned to her.

"Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!" he exploded and then smiled. "It's all right. I'm good now. I always feel better when I've done that. Was I very rude? I was so fed up at finding the place full of people, and Cousin Geraldine's so much the London lady that it

always makes me want to play the country boor for her. Anyway, what on earth had that girl come for?"

"Didn't you like her?"

"Of course not. Has she gone?"

"No."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. I'm not going down again and she can't come up here. I'm going to work. Don't go, Namy. Sit down there," he threw a cushion on to the floor, "and read one of those," he poured the contents of a bookshelf upon her knee, "and don't talk . . . not that you ever do, bless you, unless one wants you to."

He went to his table, and began to work on a half-finished model.

There was in his voice and manner a sudden nervous excitement that Naomi knew meant the radiant half-ashamed pride in his work that sometimes came to him.

She chose a book from the ones he had tumbled over her and began to read. Neither of them spoke. The clock ticked sleepily. Roddy worked at his table. Naomi sat motionless, her eyes fixed on her book. She wasn't reading. . . . She felt light-hearted and light-headed with relief, because Roddy hadn't liked Moireen. So great was her relief that she even felt kindly towards Moireen, saw her not as a scheming little adventuress, but as a defenceless child left to fight for itself, fighting gallantly with the only weapons that lay to its hand.

Roddy began to whistle between his teeth as he worked.

The drawing-room was just below Roddy's room, and through the open window there floated a soft musical laugh.

"Oh, *damn* the girl!" said Roddy. "Hasn't she gone yet?"

Naomi smiled happily.

"Don't damn her, Roddy," she said, "she's quite a darling, really."

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XII

Mr. Belson moved into The Towers in the late spring and held a "house-warming" in June. Everyone in the neighbourhood was invited. A friend of Cousin Geraldine's had come over to the Hall for the day, and she accompanied them to The Towers. She was very like Cousin Geraldine, tall and elegant and smart and tinkling, and she patronised Imogen, was very charming to Roddy, and ignored Naomi. The day of the "house-warming" was fine, and the garden was ablaze with flowers of the more elaborate sort. The ornamental pond that Vivienne had prophesied was there, with a row of smart little boats that had obviously never been used, and innumerable garden ornaments placed haphazard around it. The pseudo-classic temple stood in a little wood at the bottom of the garden, and was really rather effective from the distance. A stone terrace ran outside the front of the house, with carved balustrade and steps leading down to a lawn. On all sides were whispered comments. "My dear, what he must have *spent* on it. . . ."

"He must be simply *rolling*."

The decoration and furnishing of the house was in keeping with everything else. The drawing-room was panelled, and furnished in pink and gold, and the dining-room walls held a magnificent array of oil paintings of the ancestral type. The owner's initials were introduced freely into the decoration. He received the guests in the hall, which was banked with flowers and palms.

His aunt—an elderly woman who looked like a country-woman in her best clothes, with a sweet kindly face that shone as if from a good wash with kitchen soap—stood beside him. Naomi heard someone say that she had come to The Towers to keep house for him.

"He's risen from absolutely *nothing*, of course. His people had a farm in the North. *Farmers*, you know, not *gentlemen* farmers. This aunt of his has come down from there now. She's *quite* uneducated. So is he, of course."

Naomi was separated from her party, and followed the stream up to the music-room—the room where she and Roddy and Peter and Vivienne had surprised the owner of the house that evening when they had explored his property as trespassers. From the wide window that ran along one side of the room could now be seen, not trenched meadow, but gardens—the gardens that he had been gazing at in imagination when they surprised him.

A large organ took up another side of the room, and there was a pianola as well as a very ornate gramophone. A tall lady with grey hair and a hooked nose, whom Naomi knew vaguely as a Lainsforth autocrat, was surveying the room through her lorgnette.

"It's really *too* pathetic," she was saying.

§

Naomi slipped out of the house to the garden again. Mrs. Darrent and Moireen Silver were standing at the other side of the lawn. Moireen waved and smiled with that radiant friendliness that she showed to everyone at the most casual meeting.

Her visit to the Vicarage in the autumn had been a

short one, and she had not gone to the Hall again, after that night when Roddy had been so rude to her. This spring, however, she had once more written to invite herself—a charming affectionate letter that had touched Mrs. Darrent deeply—and she had been at the Vicarage now for a week. Naomi had met her in the village several times with her hostess. Mrs. Darrent seemed slightly bewildered by her companion, as if overpowered by her affectionateness and her unremitting charm. Mrs. Darrent was used to visitors who, when alone with her in the Vicarage, were content to read or sew to an accompaniment of desultory gossip in a sort of social undress. But Moireen didn't seem to possess any social undress. She was as vivacious and charming, as eager to interest and entertain, when the two of them were alone as when the Vicarage drawing-room was full of guests. For the first few days it had been enjoyable, but now Mrs. Darrent was beginning to tire of it. She was ashamed of tiring of it. Moireen was such a darling, so affectionate, so keen and ready to help. Mrs. Darrent was fond of her (she responded to affection as readily as a child) and proud of her, and yet—an afternoon spent with her, instead of being restful as one would have expected it to be, was far more exhausting than a day's hard work in the house or parish. It must be middle age, she told herself sadly. She was used to Vivienne and Naomi, of course, and she'd known them so long that they seemed almost part of herself, and that was why she never felt like this with them. Lately, however, Moireen hadn't been so much at the Vicarage. It turned out that she knew the Marlows, some people over at Howton, who had a house in London and a house in Scotland and more money than they knew what to do with, and she went over to see them frequently. They were not, Naomi gathered, very intimate friends, because they didn't ask her to stay with them.

Naomi could see them now in the distance—an elegant and consciously superior group—just emerging from one of the large hot-houses.

§

Moireen came running across the lawn to Naomi as if she'd only just seen her.

She looked lovely in pale green, her ash-blonde curls shining, her limpid blue eyes serene and dewy in the shade of the broad-brimmed hat.

"Naomi darling! How *lovely* to see you again. I seem to have seen nothing of you at all since I came, and it was you I *particularly* was looking forward to seeing."

It made Naomi shrink into her shell, made her cold and awkward and self-conscious even though she didn't want to be. But Moireen didn't notice. Eagerly effusive ("How's your mother? I'm so *longing* to see her again"), she had no real thought for Naomi. Her blue eyes were independent of the affectionate voice and the clasp of the cool slim hands. They were roving round the garden on a quest of their own.

Suddenly they seemed to brighten and focus themselves as if they had found what they had been looking for.

"Those are the Marlows," she said. "I *must* just run and say 'How d'you do,' darling."

§

Mrs. Tancred stopped to shake hands with Naomi. She had exhausted The Towers as a subject of gossip weeks ago, and she was concentrating on the guests.

"My dear, the Marlows are here. That means he's going to be received. Of course with his money he'll *have* to be. And they've brought Clive Bannerman with

them. He's staying with them. He's that tall handsome young man over there talking to Moireen Silver. He's Sir Derek Bannerman's heir, you know. I hear that he's quite one of *the* most eligible matches in London. Apparently . . . " she stopped suddenly. She had evidently been about to make some reference to Moireen, and then decided not to do so till she'd found a more suitable audience. She said, " Well, my dear——" vaguely to Naomi and wandered off in search of the more suitable audience.

Naomi stood, gazing across the lawn at Moireen and the handsome youth who was talking to her. Moireen had known, of course, that Clive Bannerman was staying with the Marlows, and that was why she'd come to Deerford. That was why she'd left Mrs. Darrent and attached herself to Naomi this afternoon, so that she could go to the Marlows as soon as she saw them. The Marlows had unmarried daughters, and presumably did not welcome her, but the unruffled serenity of her charm would be proof against snubs, and she was so lovely that any man would fall in love with her.

Naomi didn't realise why this made her feel so lighthearted, till suddenly the explanation flashed upon her. If this girl was in love with someone else it made Roddy all the safer. She couldn't have endured to go on *living* if Roddy had fallen in love with her.

§

Mrs. Bruce and Macaulay were sitting on a carved seat under a larch tree that had been there when the garden was a field and seemed to gaze at the scene around it with something of dismay. It was a warm day, but Mrs. Bruce was telling everyone who spoke to her about the cold that Macaulay had caught last week.

"I rubbed his chest and gave him a mustard bath and he's much better now."

Macaulay sat through these recitals with an expressionless countenance that did not alter even when his mother indicated him affectionately and said:

"You can see by his eyes that he's not *quite* himself yet, can't you? But I've put him into his mid-weight underclothes. I think it a mistake to go out of wool even in the summer."

Lily was not with them. She was standing with a group on the other side of the lawn, and her face wore its usual expression of agonised uncertainty as she gazed around her at the other groups, all of which now seemed so much more interesting than hers. She even gazed at Macaulay with a sort of wistful longing. The young man she was talking to had seemed the most attractive young man within range, and his group the most interesting, but, now that she was part of it, it had lost its glamour. The young man was being mildly nice to her but she had a horrible suspicion that he didn't mean anything. He was, after all, mildly nice to everyone. She looked across at Macaulay, sitting with his mother, swathed in his overcoat and thick woollen muffler, and he seemed so safe, so solid, so eminently a marrying man. She murmured an excuse to the man who was being mildly nice to her, and went across the lawn to greet Mrs. Bruce and Macaulay. Macaulay moved to make room for her on the seat, and she sat down between them.

"He's had such a nasty cold," said Mrs. Bruce. "I've put him back into his woollens."

Macaulay turned his expressionless face to her and said:

"I got a chill trying to find a Corydalis in the Happy Valley. It came on to rain and I hadn't taken my umbrella."

"I tell him it ought to be a lesson to him never to go out without his umbrella," said Mrs. Bruce.

Lily sat and gazed wistfully at the group she'd just left.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XIII

Naomi wandered into the Italian garden. The statues looked crudely new and the proportions of the whole thing wrong. Standing near the hedge that enclosed it, she heard Moireen's sweet laughing voice from the other side. "Clive darling, you must protect me. You mustn't leave me for a moment. All the people here are so utterly impossible. . . . Even the dear old things I'm staying with . . ." The voice died away in the distance.

A flame of anger and outraged loyalty swept over Naomi, then faded as quickly as it had come. What did this girl's insincerity matter, after all? She was nothing to them. She'ld marry Clive Bannerman and none of them would ever see her again.

She left the Italian garden and set off towards the hot-houses. It was rather fun exploring alone. . . .

Then suddenly in the passage between the yew hedges she ran into her host. He wore a tight grey suit that accentuated the bigness of his frame. He towered above her, thick-set, clumsy in build and movement. She remembered his face well, though she had only seen it once before—rugged, lined, rough-hewn, with set resolute mouth. He gave the impression of coarseness but not of vulgarity. There was nothing fine about him but there was nothing gross. He was slow-witted but not stupid. He wore the same over-abundance of jewellery as on their former meeting, and a handkerchief

of a crude shade of pink displayed itself at his breast pocket. He greeted her abruptly.

"I've been looking everywhere for you."

She was surprised and rather dismayed.

"For me? But why?"

"I wanted to show you round."

"I've been looking round."

There seemed now no possibility of escape from him. He was walking slowly down the path with her. She resigned herself to his company.

"What do you think of it?" he said after a short silence.

She considered the question for a moment and then said: "It's wonderful."

He smiled.

"Well, I gather from things I've overheard this afternoon that I've made a good few mistakes in it."

His smile was genial and without rancour. He didn't mind criticism, didn't even mind sneers probably. People could laugh at him if they wanted to. He could even laugh at himself. Yet she felt suddenly sorry for him and angry with the people who had laughed at him.

"After all, you can't expect to satisfy everyone," she said.

"I don't want to."

"If you're satisfied, that's all that matters."

"Oh, I'm satisfied all right."

He was silent for a few seconds, then said, "D'you know, it's been my ambition since I was a nipper of about ten to build a house like this—just like this."

They had reached a point of the grounds from which the house could be seen—pinnacled, turreted, balconied, the "glorious mixture of a mediæval fortress, a mosque and a picture palace." Naomi looked at it with softened

eyes. It was no longer the atrocity it had been. It was a little boy's dream. . . .

"I imagined it all just as it is now, and I said to myself, 'I'm going to work like a nigger till I've got enough to build a house like that.'"

"And you did . . . I think that's wonderful. People don't often do the things they meant to do when they were about ten," she smiled. "I meant to go into a circus and I haven't done."

"Now you're laughing at me," he said, but there was no chagrin in the smile.

"No, I'm not. I honestly think it's wonderful. You've had the thought of this hour before you all these years?"

"Yes. My mother and I used to talk about it when I was quite a little boy. It was a sort of dream to her. She made up stories about it. We used to arrange every detail of it and talk about the wonderful times we'ld have in it. My father was a very silent man and our farm was right up on the moors. She was lonely. She wasn't used to the country. She'd been brought up in a town. She only had me to talk to. We used to talk about the house. I think she half believed in it. That's my only sorrow to-day—that my mother can't see it. She *has* seen it, mind, in the old days, as plain as you see it now. She thought out her own bedroom just as she wanted it—furniture, decoration and everything. And I've given it her. It's just as she meant it to be down to the pincushion." He pointed to a balcony on the first floor. "That's it. It's hers. No one's ever going to sleep in it. She wanted a balcony like that and an awning over it to keep the sun off. She'd seen a picture of one somewhere. When I'm in the garden like this and look up to it, I seem to see her there. I see her in her apron as she used to be, not in the grand clothes she said she'ld have when I built

my house . . . purple silks and satins. She wouldn't seem real to me somehow in those. . . . "

She saw his mother clearly—a pretty, romantic, empty-headed little thing, bored and frightened by her dour, silent husband and the bleak open stretches of the moor, longing for the lights and bustle and chatter of the town. She saw this man as a little boy, too—solemn, slow, stocky, adoring his mother, letting her stuff his head with her foolish dreams. Stupidly, unimaginatively loyal, so that after all these years the most real things in his life were still the pretty, discontented town girl and her monstrous dream house. He didn't see either of them as they really were. He saw them through a haze of glamour. . . .

"You must have worked very hard," she said at last.

"Yes, I have," he admitted dispassionately. "I never cared for farm work and I never got on with my father" (She put him against both, thought Naomi), "so I came down South when my mother died——"

"How old were you?"

"I was just sixteen. I sold papers in the street at first and then I got a job in a shop and gradually—I've had luck on my side all along. I don't mean that I haven't worked as well, of course. I've worked as hard as a man can possibly work. Maybe I've worked too hard. I'm a rough, unpolished kind of man. I've been working so hard that I haven't given myself time for polish. I thought that all that could come when I'd made the money. I see now that I've likely left it too late. . . . I've thought of nothing but getting the money —to build the house, because of *her*, you know."

"You must have missed her terribly," said Naomi slowly. She was thinking that it was unkind of Fate to have denied the foolish little woman the realisation of her dream. . . .

"I did. It seemed the only thing I could do for her."

"Yes . . . I understand."

Again the house had come into view. Naomi looked at it. It wasn't real at all, of course. It was a castle in the air, touched with the glamour of the fairy-tale, a thing of mist and gossamer, like the palaces of spiders' webs in an October dawn.

"She'ld have loved it," she said softly.

He stood beside her, that naïve, childish pride on his face that she had seen when first she met him.

"Yes, it's—a gradely place," he said.

They had reached a less formal part of the garden where a grassy path wound among the old trees that had sheltered cattle in the meadows before The Towers was built.

"I want you to see something here," he said.

They turned a bend in the path and came suddenly upon a haze of blue stretching beneath the trees—a carpet of violets.

"Do you remember telling me that you liked violets?" he said. "I had these planted here because of that. I thought you'ld like them here better than in the other part of the garden. . . ."

She was taken aback.

"Oh, how nice of you . . ."

Feeling his eyes upon her, she threw him a quick glance.

He was looking at her with an expression she recognised. She'd seen it sometimes on the faces of men who watched her in the Lainsforth streets or 'bus. She'd seen it in Peter's face. She'd seen it on the faces of the men at the Commercial College. It had been a tribute to her beauty—the velvety eyes, the dark hair, the smooth dusky skin flushed rose upon the cheeks, the graceful

rounded body—something to be dismissed with half-amused contempt. It had meant nothing more to her than that. Even Peter hadn't made it mean more. Peter had only been a friend who had troubled her by asking for something she couldn't give him.

But now for the first time it did mean something more. It awoke a response in her, a sudden breathless consciousness of her power of sex. Some girls, of course, are conscious of it before they are in their teens. To Naomi it had come later than it comes to most. She had lived outside the main stream of life in a small country village. She was dreamy and self-contained. Her nature was passionate, but that childish discovery that the mother she idolised disliked her, had in part turned her passion in upon itself, in part diverted it to Roddy. The most real thing in her life was that mysterious bond that seemed to unite her to the earth and the elements. Life without those long tramps over the downs through sun or wind or rain would have been unthinkable to her. It was as if in some way the balance of her nature were restored by them, the repressed passion, that would otherwise have turned sour, kept sweet. . . .

But now suddenly the look in his eyes and the response it woke in her snatched her into a new world. A hot heady excitement came upon her, a feeling of exaltation, an intoxicating sense of power. . . . To make this big man falter and flush, to bring that look—one couldn't describe it but she always recognised it—to his face, to make him radiant or downcast by a glance. . . .

"Do you like them?" he was saying.

She laughed. Her laugh was excited, unlike her usual laugh.

"Of course I do. But why ever did you do it?"

"I did it for you."

"But why should you have done it for me?"

"As soon as you told me that violets were your favourite flower, the first day I met you, I meant to do it."

"But why? Have you planted everyone's favourite flower?"

("I'm flirting," she was saying to herself; "this is flirting. The thing that I've always looked down on as vulgar and cheap. And I'm enjoying it.")

"No . . . you're different from everyone."

"How am I different from everyone?"

("This is the way that Cissie Clements talks to the boy who picks her up at the pictures. And I'm enjoying it.")

"I've thought about you ever since that first day I saw you in the music-room. Do you remember? When I turned round and saw you at the door I thought that it was a dream at first."

She laughed again.

"Do your dreams generally take the form of dusty cyclists trespassing on your property?"

"I felt—jealous of the boy who was with you."

"Oh, but why should you be." ("It isn't the words you say, it's the tone and the way you look . . . it's rather like tennis—tossing a ball to and fro.")

"I suppose you know a lot of people about here?"

"I know most of them."

("I could do anything I liked with him. I only left school last year but he feels like that about me. Just as people feel in books. It's really happening to me. I could do what I liked with him." She was a child who suddenly finds a magic lamp with its attendant genie.)

"You do remember that day, don't you?" he went on.

"Of course I do."

"Did it—mean anything to you?"

"Days always mean things to me. That was the day I lost my bicycle lamp."

To herself she said: "That was the day that Peter asked me to marry him."

"Let's sit down here," he said, "where we can see your violets."

"My violets?"

"Of course they're yours."

They sat down on a carved seat under a beech tree. Her brown eyes were dancing with mischief and excitement, her red lips smiling. . . .

He began to speak with ponderous slowness and a heavy embarrassment.

"All my life I've believed in love at first sight," he said. "Even when I was a child I knew that I'ld know at once the woman I wanted to marry. . . ."

He had laid his arm across the back of the seat behind her, and moved a little nearer her. He had not touched her, but at once all her elation left her, and the old sick panic, the terror of being possessed, swept over her. She rose, trembling.

"Let's go back," she said in a quick, unsteady voice.

He accompanied her back to the crowded lawn without a word and then left her.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XIV

Her terror had departed but her veins were still on fire. Something had been born in her that hadn't been there before. Love . . . her blood raced and her heart quickened. . . . What children she and Roddy had been to think that they could do without it! The whole world was suddenly changed. She didn't know what had

changed it—certainly not the clumsy, middle-aged man who had made love to her—but it was as if she felt new power, new forces, spring to birth in her. She looked about her with a shy, eager curiosity, tremulous, half ashamed. All these married women around her had been longed for, wooed, possessed. Men had come to them as lovers. . . .

Someone would come to her as a lover. . . . Her imagination conjured up a shadowy form—lithe, young, virile. He came nearer and his face was Roddy's. That was silly . . . but, of course, every girl who loved her brother as she loved Roddy probably imagined her future lover to be like him. . . .

The crowds about her seemed suddenly oppressive to her, and she escaped from them into the now deserted Italian garden, and sat on a carved stone seat gazing unseeingly in front of her. She looked startlingly beautiful, her eyes dark and soft and dewy, her red lips parted, all the radiant bloom of opening womanhood and untouched passion upon her. She was so lost in her dreams that she didn't know that her host had joined her again, till he was actually sitting by her upon the seat. She wasn't afraid of him any longer, but she shrank from him in distaste. Stout, rugged, middle-aged, he seemed even coarser than he was, when he stood beside the lover of her dreams, that lover who was young, and virile, and handsome, with dark deep-set eyes like Roddy's. . . .

She saw at once that he was distressed.

"Please don't go," he pleaded. "I frightened you just now. I didn't mean to. I'd no idea . . . no intention of insulting you. I want you to know that."

She smiled at him with an effort.

"I know," she said breathlessly. "It's quite all right. It was silly of me. . . ."

To herself she was saying desperately: "Oh, go, go, *go*. You're spoiling everything."

Sitting there beside her, he put to flight all the glamour and radiance of her dreams. His untuneful voice dispelled the delicious languor from her veins.

"I respect you too deeply, too sincerely, to have intended any insult."

She threw him a forced smile.

"Of course . . . I understand."

("Oh, go, go, *go*," she was saying, "leave me alone. I was so happy and now you've spoilt it all. . . .")

"I hadn't meant to say anything yet," he went on slowly, ponderously. "I'd meant to wait for—some months, a year, perhaps. . . . From the minute I saw you there in the music-room before the house was built, I knew that I loved you. I've never loved any woman before and I shall never love any woman again. I knew you . . . as if I'd known you all my life. I didn't mean to speak yet. I meant to wait, to prepare you. . . . But to-day when I frightened you . . . I had to tell you that I loved you, that the greatest dream of my life was to marry you. I wanted you to understand."

At first she had hardly listened to what he said, but now the meaning of his words came to her. She caught her breath in horror. It was monstrous, incredible. . . . She could hardly believe that she had heard aright. She felt outraged and humiliated.

"Oh, no," she said, "no, no, no."

He spoke gently.

"I've upset you. I'm sorry. I spoke too abruptly. You're very young."

"I don't love you . . . it's impossible."

"You don't know what love is," he said. "I think that you might find . . ."

"What?"

"Love often comes after marriage. You're—unawakened. You see, I've thought about this and dreamed about this for so long now. I love you so very much. I believe that, if you'ld trust yourself to me, love would come."

She looked again at his coarse-featured countenance with the marks of his plebeian origin stamped indelibly upon it, his large, red, unshapely hands. (Her lover's hands were white and thin and nervous . . . Roddy's hands.) It was incredible that he was serious.

She rose abruptly. She was trembling.

"Please understand," she said, "I could never marry you. Never. I'm sorry, but you *must* believe it and you mustn't speak to me about it again."

She walked away from him quickly without looking back.

§

Just on the edge of the lawn she met his aunt. At close quarters she looked even more absurd than she had looked in the distance. She was dressed in a cape and an old-fashioned bonnet. You'ld have taken her for an old family servant in her best clothes. At the sight of her Naomi's heart suddenly lightened. The quaint little figure made the whole episode—his admiration, his proposal—amusing. There was nothing to be angry or distressed about. These people couldn't touch her, couldn't touch even the shadow of her dreams. She drew her shining youth about her like a cloak, and at her heart she held her secret treasure, the strange new radiance that had set her blood pulsing warmly through her veins.

§

Then she saw Mrs. Darrent signalling to her and went across to her. Her mother and the others had gone home, Mrs. Darrent said. They had not been able to find her, and Mrs. Darrent had promised to take her home with her.

She smiled at Naomi as Naomi came up to her, glancing with approval at the deep colour in the smooth cheeks and the brightness of the dark eyes.

"You look *so* well, my dear," she said, "and *so* pretty." She turned to Moireen, who had also come up in answer to the signal, leaving Clive Bannerman with the Marlows. "Doesn't she?"

"She's *lovely*," said Moireen eagerly. (Moireen, too, looked flushed and bright-eyed.) "If I were a painter, I'd know no peace till I'd tried to paint her. Her colouring's so glorious. . . . *Darling* Naomi, I haven't seen you for ages. When can I come and see you?"

"Come any time," said Naomi shortly.

Moireen's effusiveness could chill even the new warmth at her heart.

And again she felt that little thrill of relief that Roddy didn't like her.

"We must go now," said Mrs. Darrent. "It's been delightful, hasn't it? It's really quite a show place. He must have given such a lot of care and thought to it. I do hope he'll be happy here. I must go and tell him how nice I think everything is. I think it's been a wonderful afternoon. Everything so well organised."

Mrs. Darrent always took for granted in her host and hostess that burning anxiety to know that the party had been a success that she felt at her own parties, and was always eager to reassure and praise.

NAOMI entered the house by the French window that led into the drawing-room, and stood there for a moment, gazing dreamily out at the garden.

She was vaguely aware that Cousin Geraldine and her friend were in the other part of the room by the fireplace, but she paid no heed to them. She was far away from them in a world of her own. Then, with startling clearness, she heard Cousin Geraldine's voice :

" She isn't Imogen's child, you know."

She stood there, tense, rigid, listening.

" It's a ridiculously melodramatic story. She was left by a gipsy on the doorstep. My dear, doesn't it sound absurd ? "

" She wasn't——? "

" Oh, no. She wasn't Michael's child. Michael wasn't like that. . . . He was a ridiculous creature, you know, full of absurdities, but he wasn't like that. He imagined that he was an artist—just as Roddy does with his modelling. He was more sentimental than Roddy, though. He loved giving things to beggars. The sort of thing that they call ' gestures ' nowadays. And he'd longed for a child. He and Imogen had been married for five years, and hadn't had one, and they'd almost given up hope. . . . They lived in the North then, you know. He met this gipsy on the moor one day with her child—it was only a fortnight old—and began to talk to her. He loved talking to people like that. People he knew in the ordinary way bored him stiff, but a tramp or a gipsy or a plumber or—anyone he'ld not be likely to meet in the ordinary way—thrilled him. He'ld talk to them for hours. I think that he'd got the artistic temperament though he couldn't create. Well, he admired this

woman's baby, held it and talked to it—he adored children—and told her what a grief it was to him that he'd none of his own. He was a peculiar man, very reserved with his own friends, but he'ld tell a stranger his most intimate secrets. Some people are like that. The result was that the next day he found the baby on the doorstep, and no one's ever been able to trace the woman. She completely disappeared."

"How ghastly for him!" in the soft tinkling voice of Cousin Geraldine's friend.

"My dear, he was delighted. If the child had been born to him and Imogen, he couldn't have been more delighted with it. In fact, after a few weeks I think he quite persuaded himself that it had been born to him and Imogen. Michael could persuade himself of anything."

"And Imogen——"

"Imogen hated it. Hated it always. To put a gipsy brat in the place of the child she might have had, and later to put it before the child she did have. . . . That was the only time I ever knew her to stand out against him. She begged him to send it to the workhouse. But she loved him so much that she couldn't stand out against him long even over that. She soon gave in. She's always been as hard as nails with everyone else, but she loved Michael, and, when women like Imogen love, they do it thoroughly. They seem to give all the love they've got to the one person. She couldn't stand out against him. He wanted the child and she couldn't deny it to him. They were just moving—coming to live in the South—and, as it happened, the story never followed them, and no one ever doubted that the child was their own. By the end of a year she'd grown really to care for the child. She was a lovely baby, you know . . . brown and bonny and good-tempered, except for sudden little storms of passion that were delicious. But

then—Roddy came and that spoilt it all. I think that she hated Naomi from the moment that she knew she was going to have a child herself. It spoilt things between her and Michael. When Roddy came she was jealous of Naomi, and Michael was jealous of Roddy. Roddy was a fretful, unattractive child, and Michael never cared much for him. Naomi was just toddling when he was born, and was full of pretty ways. Michael was crazy about her. He was hurt because Imogen ignored her, and Imogen was hurt because he ignored Roddy. And then came their hard time. He'd no idea of money. He'd realised his share of the factory and simply walked through it. He was absurdly happy, painting ridiculous daubs that no one would buy, and adoring Imogen and Naomi. He died very selfishly just when he'd finally got through the money. He couldn't bear Naomi out of his sight when he was ill, and he was obsessed by a fear that Imogen would turn her away after his death, so he made her promise him that she'ld bring her up as her own daughter and not tell her the truth till she was twenty-one—unless, of course, she married before that, when she would have to know."

"Rather hard lines on Imogen."

"It was *wicked*. She'd only a little money of her own, barely enough to keep them. She came here because this house had been left to her by an uncle, and she couldn't sell it or let it. It was so out-of-the-way and in such bad repair. I think she's been splendid. It's been maddening to have to spend money on a gipsy's child that she might have spent on her own boy, to see her own child stinted of things he might have had if it hadn't been for that crazy impulse of Michael's."

"How old is the girl? When will she have to know?"

"Quite soon now. Imogen's dreading it."

"Dreading it? I should think it would be rather a relief to her."

"My dear, there's Roddy. . . . Naomi and Roddy are devoted to each other. Imogen's terrified that, when he knows she's not his sister, he'll imagine himself in love with her. Her one dread is that Naomi may end by being her daughter-in-law."

The hard tinkling laugh.

"The cuckoo in the nest with a vengeance!"

"Imogen has a strong pride of race, you know. She's poor but she's of very good family on both sides. I think it would kill her to see her only son married to a gipsy's child that ought to have been brought up in the workhouse. And, of course, it isn't only that. One never knows what tendencies may come out in a child taken from the gutter like that. . . . One can't take for granted instincts and standards that one takes for granted in one's own. . . ."

Naomi stood motionless, her dark eyes staring out of a dead-white face. After that first shock, that had turned the world to a black mist before her eyes and sent hot waves of shame and humiliation surging through her body, all her feelings seemed to be numbed. Only her brain worked. A pride as strong as Imogen's, the heritage of an older race than Imogen's, was woven into the very tissues of her being. She was conscious now of nothing but the fact that somehow at once she must repay to Imogen all the money that she had spent on her. . . . She couldn't endure to live till she'd done that. She must shirk nothing, stop at nothing to do that.

She fixed her mind firmly on ways and means. She couldn't let it turn to that black horror of shame and humiliation that was waiting for her. It was like something half glimpsed at which her very soul sickened. Sooner or later it must be faced, but if she faced it before

she had formed some plan it would be more than she could bear. . . .

Work? She'd nearly finished the course at the Commercial College, but she could only get a post as a typist —only earn just enough to keep herself, not enough to pay her debt to Imogen. . . . Could she have paid her debt to Imogen by killing herself at that moment, she would have done it without a second's hesitation.

And then suddenly a memory came to her. She drew in her breath. Her eyes seemed to grow bigger and darker in her white face, her lips took a line that marred their youth. She turned and went swiftly out of the French window and down the drive.

§

She stood at the front door of The Towers and rang the bell. A butler opened the door. It was clear that all the guests had departed now.

"Is Mr. Belson at home, please?"

She was shown into the library. She hadn't been into that room before. She looked at it with hard, impersonal curiosity . . . leather chairs, pedestal writing-desk, the walls lined with leather-bound books. Books that nobody had ever read or ever would read. Perhaps they were imitation books. . . . No, it was all real . . . real marble, real stone, real leather. Hideous, but real. . . .

He had come in, and was standing just inside the door, looking at her in sudden concern.

"You're not well——"

She interrupted him.

"I am well. You asked me to marry you. I've come to say that I will marry you if you still want me to."

Her voice sounded strange to her—as if it were someone else's voice. It seemed to come from a long way off and yet it seemed to fill the room like thunder. Then quite suddenly the room disappeared. She sat down heavily upon the chair that he had moved forward for her. The darkness only lasted a second. After that second it cleared, and the room came back, leather chairs, pedestal writing-desk, book-lined walls and—the stranger whom she was going to marry. She fixed her dilated eyes in front of her, and began to speak in a dull, monotonous voice as if she were repeating a lesson.

"I've just discovered that I'm—not Mrs. Godstone's daughter. I'm a gipsy's child whom her husband adopted. I've no claim on her—or him. She never wanted to bring me up. He made her. She's—not well off and she's had to spend a lot of money on me. . . ."

She stopped and moistened her lips. All her energies were bent on mastering her voice. It wanted to do queer things, to become shrill and sharp, to waver, to die away. She gathered herself together with a tense effort that sent a visible quiver through her body, and continued:

"I don't love you. I—could never love you, but if you'll take me on those terms I'll marry you. You're a rich man and I want to pay back my debt to Mrs. Godstone."

He had gone over to the window, and was standing there with his back to her, as if he wished to spare her as much as he could, by not watching her emotion. There was silence when she had finished speaking. Then he turned round abruptly, and spoke with his thick North-country burr.

"I'll pay back your debt for you without your marrying me. Pretend that you're my sister. I haven't a sister and I suppose that now you haven't a brother." (Her heart moaned, "Oh, Roddy, Roddy!") "Well"

—he spread out his hands—"let's adopt each other. You come to me for help as a brother. And I'll come to you for help when I need a sister. . . ."

She shook her head. "I can't take money as a gift. Then I'ld only feel to you as I feel to my—to Mrs. Godstone. It would be more hateful even than it is now. I must *earn* the money and this is the only way I can earn it."

"By marrying me?"

"You want a wife. . . ."

"I want you for my wife."

"It would be a bargain. You'ld pay my debt for me and I'ld be your wife."

Her voice was steady now, but she was trembling uncontrollably, and her face was stripped of its youth.

"Do you love anyone else?" he said bluntly.

"No."

"Don't be in a hurry. You're upset now. Think it over. I'ld be more than human if I didn't feel tempted to accept your offer. I'm—in love with you. But I don't want to take advantage of a moment when you've —had a shock and feel desperate. Let me give you the money now and leave the other matter open. You talk of earning the money. My child, you earn it in the pleasure you give me in feeling that you've come to me for help and that I've been able to help you."

His voice was kind and soothing—the voice in which one would speak to a frightened child. For some reason that she didn't understand, it sent an intolerable pang through her heart. She spoke sharply through her teeth.

"*Don't!* . . . I don't want to wait. I must know now, at once. I can't go back to-night, I can't sleep there to-night, unless I *know*." Her voice broke hysterically, then grew steady again. "I can't look at—her, at any

of them until I know I can—pay them back. . . . It wasn't fair to me. They should have thought of me. I didn't ask them to take me in. I wish to God they'd sent me to the workhouse. If I had to live on charity, I'ld rather have lived on it that way. . . . I couldn't have been more—looked down on than she's—looked down on me always."

She raised her head with a quick fierce movement.

"Don't you understand? . . . To feel that I owe her every bite I've ever had, every stitch I've ever worn, and that she—never wanted me, and that I can't help it, can't undo it . . . it's like being trapped. I can only pay her back the money she's spent on me, and till I do that I can't breathe, I can't—go on living. . . ."

The controlled passion of the young voice, the smouldering light in the dark eyes, seemed to fill the room like something sultry, suffocating. Looking at her, comparing her with the radiant girl of the afternoon, he felt a sharp pity for her that deepened his love.

She turned to him suddenly, as if struck by a sudden thought, her nostrils dilated, her head high.

"Perhaps now that you know the truth, you don't want me either. Perhaps you don't want a gipsy's brat for your wife any more than she does for Roddy."

"Did she say that?"

"Not to me, but it came from her."

(Not just like that, something in her heart pleaded; it couldn't have come from her just like that.)

He came nearer her and looked down at her, his hands on his hips.

"Do you love Roddy?"

She shrank back.

"No," she cried sharply, "not like that . . . not like that."

"You love no one?"

"No one." Her eyes were dead. "I shall never love anyone. Never. Not now."

"You're willing to marry me?"

"Yes. As soon as possible. I want to get away from —them."

"Would you like me to arrange about the—payment?"

"Yes, please."

She looked about the room, at the elaborate panelling, the ornate furniture . . . at the thick-set, burly figure before her. This was going to be her home . . . this her husband. And there came to her that sudden panic of desperation, that sensation of fighting off something that was choking her, that had been her nightmare on the few occasions when Imogen had forced her to sleep indoors against her will. It was all a nightmare, of course . . . a bad dream . . . it was too horrible to be true. She'ld wake up soon and laugh at it, wake up to find the Hall her home, Roddy her brother, and Imogen, the Imogen of her dreams, her mother.

"That's settled, then?" he said slowly.

Her white lips formed "Thank you. . . . Goodbye," and she turned to the door. He made no attempt at any demonstration of affection. He opened the door for her and she passed out.

That was their betrothal.

§

Roddy had come home. His hat was on the hat-stand. Ordinarily it would have sent a familiar little thrill of excitement through her. Now it meant nothing. . . . Roddy . . . he didn't belong to her . . . she didn't belong to him.

Imogen was coming slowly downstairs, wearing a black evening dress.

"Naomi, my dear, you're very late. Where have you been? I thought you'd come home some time ago."

Naomi raised her white set face. There was no feeling in her heart at all. It was like a limb numbed by the cold. The pain of its coming to life would be agonising, but for the present there was no pain, only a feeling of heaviness as if she dragged a dead weight about with her.

"May I speak to you, please?"

"Certainly." Imogen's cool, quiet voice showed a faint surprise. "I believe Cousin Geraldine's in the drawing-room. Will you come up to my bedroom?"

Naomi followed her up the wide shallow staircase to her bedroom, a spacious room with windows overlooking the lawn. It was austerely furnished, no fal-lals, no photographs. It wore that air of impersonal fastidiousness that belonged to Imogen herself. Naomi closed the bedroom door, and stood there leaning against it.

"My dear child," said Imogen in sudden concern, "aren't you well?"

"I'm quite well," said Naomi. She noticed with relief that her voice wasn't playing tricks now. It was cold and dead, but then all of her was cold and dead. "I'm quite well. I only wanted to tell you that I'm going to marry Mr. Belson."

"Mr. Belson?"

There was sharp surprise, almost incredulity, in Imogen's voice.

"Yes."

"When did he ask you?"

"This afternoon."

"And you accepted?"

"Yes."

Another silence. The blue eyes looked at her questioningly with that faint shadow of weary disdain in their depth that so seldom left them.

"Do you love him?"

"Yes," lied Naomi.

There was a long silence. The blue eyes looked at her now searchingly. They were puzzled, worried, as if they were thinking: I must do my duty by her. I promised Michael. . . .

"You're quite sure?"

"Yes."

And then Imogen, shrugging faintly, made a weary little gesture that seemed to disclaim responsibility. It seemed to say, "I'm sorry, but what can I do? And, anyway, what does it matter? She's selling her love for money. It's in her blood, I suppose."

The knowledge that she was thinking that, sent a strange fierce joy through the deadness of Naomi's heart. Let her hate her. Let them hate each other so bitterly that after the debt was settled they need never see each other again. . . .

Then suddenly Imogen frowned, bit her lip and looked at Naomi anxiously, and Naomi, standing there, leaning against the door, white-cheeked, her head erect, her eyes hard yet smouldering, knew that she was wondering whether to tell her about her mother now, or put it off till later. She seemed to come to a sudden decision, bracing herself with a visible effort.

"Naomi, there's something I must tell you."

The girl's eyes did not falter, and her voice did not change.

"I know it. I'm not your daughter. My mother was a gipsy."

Imogen drew in her breath sharply.

"How do you know?"

"I overheard Cousin Geraldine telling someone."

Again that weary little gesture . . . white hands thrown out, but so slightly that they hardly seemed to move.

"Oh, my dear, I'm sorry you heard that way."

"What does it matter how I heard?" The girl paused, then went on not quite steadily. "You've had to spend a lot of money on me. I can repay it, of course, when I'm married to Mr. Belson."

Imogen flushed faintly.

"I don't want you to repay it. The idea never occurred to me. What I did for you was a promise to my husband. He didn't want me to tell you till you were twenty-one unless you married before that. I'm sorry that you heard it as you did."

"I don't see that it matters how I heard it. . . . I think I've always known that you weren't my mother."

"You mean that I've not made you happy? . . . I'm sorry. I never understood you."

"You never wanted me."

"No," said Imogen in her gentle voice, impersonal and detached. "I never wanted you. I can't pretend that I did. No woman wants to have to bring up another woman's child when she has barely enough for her own. I've tried to be fair to you."

"You've never loved me."

"One can't compel love. I was never—fond of children in the ordinary way. You were a—stranger. Roddy was my own flesh. I've tried to be fair to you, Naomi. Don't blame me too hardly."

"I don't blame you. It wasn't your fault and it wasn't mine. It was—cruel to us both. I didn't—understand. But for that reason, because I'm a—stranger, I want to look on what you did for me as a debt and to pay it back."

Queer, thought the woman, watching her. Queer and incalculable and—repellent, somehow. A little gipsy from the beginning. Environment had had no effect on her. Useless even to try to understand her. She belonged to an alien race.

"I refuse to discuss the matter with you, Naomi."

"I'll ask my—fiancé to speak to your lawyer."

My fiancé. . . . Suddenly the elder woman realised that the danger which she had dreaded was over. She needn't fear any longer the girl's voluptuous beauty for Roddy. . . . Relief made her feel kindly, made her want to understand and help.

"Naomi . . ." she began gently.

But Naomi had already gone.

NAOMI GODSTONE — CHAPTER XVI

THE weeks flew by in a rush of preparations. Cousin Geraldine seemed to have taken the wedding completely into her own hands. She organised it and stage-managed it as if it were a pageant. She designed bridesmaids' dresses, and made elaborate schemes for the decoration of the church. The cold amusement that had always shown itself in her manner to Naomi disappeared, and was replaced by respect. This girl had more in her than she had thought. She was playing her cards well. Cousin Geraldine had nothing but respect for a girl who played her cards well. She was what is known as a woman of the world, and she now treated Naomi as belonging to the same order, speaking to her of Imogen with a certain pitying contempt. "She's always been so impractical, you know, poor Imogen!"

They had taken for granted that Vivienne would be a bridesmaid, and had been surprised at Naomi's uncompromising refusal. Cousin Geraldine was secretly relieved by it. Vivienne's colouring wouldn't have fitted into her scheme of decoration at all. Her hair would have clashed with the pink roses. Lily and Moireen were to be the only bridesmaids. Cousin Geraldine was delighted with them. "Leghorn hats with roses and black velvet ribbon, white dresses and blue sashes, a sort of Reynolds effect," she had decreed. "Simple but sophisticated. That's the note for a country wedding."

Naomi had informed Vivienne shortly and impersonally of her engagement, and Vivienne had replied by congratulations as short and impersonal. That was the best part of Vivienne. . . . She never came an inch further into your confidence than you invited her. Lily was pleased at being chosen as a bridesmaid, but the anxiety of her protruding eyes had sharpened considerably since she heard the news of Naomi's engagement. It was always exquisite torture to Lily to hear of another girl's engagement. It gave her the sensation of having been outstripped in a race. It made her take stock of her position, as it were. She would have considered the very idea of a marriage with Humphrey Belson ludicrous before she heard of Naomi's engagement, but now that Naomi was engaged to him he seemed the perfection of eligibility. She compared her charms with Naomi's. Surely she ought to have as good a "chance" as Naomi. She was a much more refined type. . . . She wondered who was going to be best man. She dropped the Bruces temporarily, and made excuses for looking up several old school friends who possessed eligible brothers, pursued them feverishly for a few days, then returned suddenly to the Bruces, terrified lest Macaulay, who in absence seemed

to her a veritable Prince Charming, should have been annexed by someone else in the interval. She found him delighted at having found a Dianthus Armeria, and quite unaware that he hadn't seen her for over two weeks.

Moireen was charming, full of eager affection for Naomi, hand in glove with Cousin Geraldine over the wedding arrangements, and ready to join, with her air of childish ingenuousness, in the slightly malicious strictures on the affair that were being passed freely in the neighbourhood.

Mrs. Fuller, indeed, went about in almost complete silence in these days, because she couldn't think of anything to say that was kind and true and necessary.

§

Naomi herself moved in a sort of dream. The vital part of her seemed to have died when she had stood there at the French window, and had heard Cousin Geraldine's hard tinkling voice saying, " She isn't really Imogen's daughter, you know . . . "

She was like a ghost haunting the place where she used to live. And all the people round her were ghosts too. Roddy, sullen and hostile (Roddy hadn't spoken to her since he heard of her engagement) . . . Imogen, puzzled, remote, wearily disdainful as ever . . . Cousin Geraldine with this new effusive friendliness, this hard tinkling familiarity. . . . Closeted with Cousin Geraldine, discussing fashions, arguing about materials—she who had worn anything and never cared what she looked like. Of course it was all a dream. She clung to the trivial preparations that occupied each moment, holding them as if they were fingers to her eyes, to shut out some

horrible sight. She would wake in the morning with a sickening weight at her heart, a dim unformulated knowledge of some unspeakable calamity about to happen to her, but always she cheated the actual realisation, drawing her armour about her, deliberately hardening her heart, turning her thoughts with quick cunning to the discussions she'd been having with Cousin Geraldine the evening before ("Blue or brown for the going away dress? You're a type that can wear any colour. You'ld look wonderful in yellow, of course. Why not yellow?"), cheating it, closing her doors on it before it could enter. . . . Shopping expeditions to town with Cousin Geraldine . . . being tried on and fitted. ("My dear, I used to go to her *always* till I met someone in *exactly* the same dress as mine though she'd *sworn* it was a model."). . . Writing letters to thank people for the wedding presents that were pouring in. Mrs. Masterson felt almost grateful to Naomi for getting married, and thus giving her an excuse for buying another ladderback chair, though it was a wrench to part with it to Naomi when it actually arrived.

This new self of Naomi's—the self that didn't belong to her—was poised and cool and passionless. With unconscious imitation, she put into it something of Cousin Geraldine and something of Imogen. Right down beneath it, not dead but numbed to a spurious lifelessness, lay the girl who had run laughing over the downs through the rain and wind, who had seen the world in sudden flashes of glamour. She never went up on to the downs now. And she never slept out of doors.

She saw her fiancé, of course, but he was more unreal, more dreamlike, than Roddy or Imogen or Cousin Geraldine. He seemed quite satisfied with the self that her pride had forged for her, with the light hardness that

was a blend of Imogen and Cousin Geraldine, the self that smiled brightly—like sunshine on frost—and talked easily and fluently about superficial things.

§

Imogen was sewing, her fair head bent low over her work. Naomi was at the writing-table writing letters of thanks for the wedding presents. She turned round.

"What did Mrs. Fuller send——?" She stopped abruptly. Imogen had looked up, and something in her pose as she sat there, aloof, withdrawn, her unsmiling eyes fixed questioningly on Naomi's face, stirred a sudden unbearable pain at her heart, like the awakening of an old wound. How many times in her childhood had she sat and watched Imogen's head bent over her sewing, imagining it raised suddenly to hers with a quick loving smile when she spoke, feeding her hungry little soul on the picture, half dreading to put it to the test, then asking aloud some childish question ("Oh, God, please let her look at me the way she looks at Roddy")—and the fair head raised with this look, unsmiling, withdrawn, the look one gives to a stranger . . . and all the radiance faded and it was as if she were shut out again in the dark and cold. It had power even now to pierce through her armour with a little stab of pain, and, hitting back blindly, instinctively, trying to hurt Imogen as Imogen had hurt her, she added breathlessly, "Mrs. Godstone?"

Imogen looked at her sharply.

"My dear," she said quietly, "that's rather unnecessary, isn't it?"

Naomi lost her new poise, and became again the sulky little girl of her childhood.

"I can't very well call you mother now," she muttered.

"No, I suppose you can't." Imogen was speaking more kindly, frowning as if she recognised the problem. "Why not Aunt Imogen? Or Imogen alone?"

So after that she called her Imogen.

§

As the day of the wedding approached, she felt as if she were living in that nightmare in which some horror draws nearer and nearer, and, though there is still time for escape, one cannot move a foot to flee from it.

She had packed her boxes. The drawers in the old-fashioned chest were empty. In the locked drawer she had found the torn photograph of Imogen, and a sharp pang had shot through the deadness of her heart. She had thrown it into the waste-paper basket, then taken it out and packed it.

On the night before her wedding she awoke suddenly, gasping for breath, bathed in perspiration. Some actual physical weight seemed to be oppressing her. As sleep dispersed, she realised that it was the thought of her marriage. She thought of it as something monstrous, something horrible, accomplished beyond recall, then gradually more complete wakefulness came to her, and she knew with a quick stab of relief that it was not actually accomplished, that it was not too late to stop it. The wedding was to take place at two o'clock. She could cancel it, let everyone know, send back the presents. It wasn't too late.

Her faculties became clearer, her memory sharper, as the last mists of sleep vanished. If she put off the wedding, the money would have to be returned to Humphrey. Time would slip back to that searing moment when first she learnt that she had lived on

Imogen's unwilling charity all those years, and that there was no way that she could see to repay the debt. It was no use trying to escape. She was in a trap. She must go on blindly to—whatever was in store for her.

As she sat there staring into the darkness, her heart racing wildly, the door opened softly and Imogen entered.

"Are you awake, Naomi?"

"Yes."

Imogen came over to the bed and stood by it uncertainly, as if not knowing what to say. She too had awakened, troubled and uneasy, from a dream about her husband, and there had come to her the vivid remembrance of his love for this child. Memories long forgotten had returned to her. Michael dancing a dark-eyed baby in his arms, making up ridiculous fairy-tales for her, decking her with strings of buttercups. That picture was suddenly so vivid that she might have seen it yesterday. Naomi and Michael in a meadow in the bright sunlight. Naomi laughing—fat baby gurgles of laughter—as he crowned her with the fragile golden chains, winding them round her chubby wrists and legs.

Naomi had been Michael's trust to her. Had she kept the trust? She'd tried to do her duty, but at the bottom of her heart was an unceasing nagging doubt. She'd found the child difficult and unattractive, a little gipsy from the beginning. But—was there some key to her that she'd never found, because she'd never troubled to look for it? She'd spent money on her as freely as if she had been her own daughter. There was nothing that she would have given her own daughter that she had not given to Naomi—a good school, clothes, pocket-money. And yet—were those things sops thrown to her conscience, because she'd never loved the child, never really tried to understand her? And to-night she had dreamed of

Michael, and awakened with a feeling of heavy anxiety. Did the child need her help? She was marrying this man for his money. Did she realise quite all that that implied? Lying in bed, with the memory of her husband made more vivid by her dream, Imogen faced the jealousy that had smouldered unacknowledged in her heart for so many years, the jealousy of Roddy's love for this girl, a love from which she had felt shut out, remembered with a haunting sense of guilt that quick stab of relief that she had felt when she heard of Naomi's engagement. Naomi had sat up in bed and was gazing steadily at that white blur in the darkness that was Imogen.

"Yes?" she said again.

"Naomi"—the voice was troubled, uncertain—"are you quite sure that you love this man?"

"Yes."

"You realise—don't you?—that if you—don't really love him it's not too late to—tell him so, to—stop the wedding."

"Yes."

The girl's struggle to conceal her emotion made her voice sound harsh and sullen. A sigh came through the darkness—a little weary, hopeless, baffled sigh—and Naomi could almost see the faint shrug of the thin graceful shoulders, the little gesture of white hands ever so slightly thrown out. . . .

"Naomi."

"Yes."

"One's apt to think when one hasn't money that it's all that's needed to make one happy, but—it doesn't make one happy, you know. You can't be happy without love. You so soon get used to the things that money can buy—they mean nothing. They don't last. Only love lasts. I loved my husband and—I know."

Naomi said nothing. She sat clenching her fists,

digging her teeth into her lip. That tenderness in Imogen's voice wasn't for her. It was for Michael. Imogen had moved to the window, and stood there, gazing out at the dark shadows of the trees. The sky was faintly powdered with stars. Her dream had stirred her deeply, waking again that old longing for Michael, sharpening it to an agony. Life had stopped for her when Michael died. She had existed since then in a world of shadows in which the only real thing had been Roddy, Michael's son.

She turned again to where Naomi sat silent and motionless in the darkness.

"You feel—quite happy about the wedding, Naomi?"

"Yes."

She had a sudden impulse to put her arms about the girl, to cradle her as one cradles a child, but invisible barriers, stronger than iron, held her back. She had never been demonstrative to Naomi or to anyone. She couldn't suddenly begin. Yet her arms quivered, as if she fought against tangible bonds to put them out. Before her eyes was that torturing picture of Michael laughing as he wound golden chains of buttercups about a dark-eyed baby. ("I'm doing all I can, Michael," her heart pleaded, "I'm doing all I can.")

"Naomi," she went on softly, "you're very young, and you've seen very little of the world. You feel perhaps that you haven't had a lot of the things that other girls have. But you know that I've done all I can for you. I've spent as much on you as on Roddy."

She was pleading with Michael, not Naomi, begging him to turn from the laughing child and hear her.

But the words only recalled to Naomi her indebtedness, brought back the words, "It's been maddening for her to have to spend money on this gipsy's child, that she might have spent on her own boy." Her quick

fierce pride sprang to arms, and the moment when they might have drawn together was over.

"I know," she said. "I know. It's been—unfair to you."

The woman felt chilled. Her proffered sympathy had been flung back in her face. Still, for Michael's sake, she made one more effort.

"There's—nothing I can do for you, Naomi?"

"Nothing—thank you."

"Good night, my dear."

"Good night."

She went softly from the room. ("I've done all I can, Michael. She's hard. She doesn't care. It's in her blood. Her mother gave herself to a man for money, I suppose. She's only doing the same in a different way. It doesn't matter. Let her go. We've got each other. You and I and Roddy. . . .")

§

The girl lay there in the darkness, trembling, struggling against an overwhelming temptation to let her emotion have its way with her, to bury her face into the pillow and sob her heart out. She couldn't, she mustn't do that. If once she let herself begin, she'ld never stop. And what good would it be? Of her very pride she couldn't turn back now. She'd gone too far. . . .

She summoned that pride to her like an armour, encasing herself in it, shutting out the warning voice that said, "Turn back. Don't do this thing." One could shut it out. One could silence it with one's pride. She was repaying a debt of honour. When one learnt that one had lived on charity—unwilling charity—all one's life, there was no honourable course open to one but to pay one's debt. To pay it she had to incur another

debt, but she would pay that, too. Humphrey was buying her for his wife. She was prepared to give him his money's worth, to fulfil her obligation. She'ld look upon the rest of her life as a payment of her debt to him. She'ld pay to the last farthing. And so she would be free, her pride unsmirched. Don't listen to the warning voice. Don't think of Imogen or Roddy. Don't think of the dream lover she'd imagined only a month ago. Think of Cousin Geraldine . . . listen to Cousin Geraldine's tinkling little voice saying, " I think the French are so sensible. An ' arranged ' marriage has so much more chance of success than a love match. Love comes and goes. If one's in love with the man one marries, one's in love with someone else the next year. Money and a position last and love doesn't." Don't remember what Imogen had said, " Only love lasts. . . . " (" Between you and me, my dear, Imogen's slightly stupid.") Think of Cousin Geraldine—hard and bright and cynical. What does it matter, anyway ? One marriage is as good as another. People who marry for love are often the most unhappy. Crush those other feelings down ruthlessly. One could. It was strange, but one could. It gave one a curious sense of power. One could feel just what one wanted to feel. She suddenly relaxed all effort and slipped into a heavy, unrefreshing sleep.

§

Cousin Geraldine, radiant and triumphant, putting the finishing touches to Naomi's dress. . . . " I told Imogen that she mustn't. She can't put on her own clothes, much less anyone else's. My dear, you look lovely, *lovely*. Your colouring's wonderful. Where do you get it from ? "

"I'm a gipsy, you know."

"You're a very clever little gipsy, and you're going to be a very rich little gipsy."

It came so unexpectedly through her armour as to be like a sword thrust—this sudden stab of hatred of Cousin Geraldine and her tinkling hardness.

"The veil over your face for the service, of course, and put back in the vestry. I'm glad we had pearls. Orange blossom's so frightfully banal nowadays."

Moireen's face, demure and exquisite beneath the Leghorn hat . . . the long white Reynolds dresses, the blue sashes, and the armfuls of tall field daisies. Lily's eyes protruding as if from some late shock. She had indeed lately survived a shock, for she had just heard that the best man (a rich business man on whom she had been building her hopes) was engaged, and was to be married the next month. Her eyes wandered anxiously to where Macaulay sat with his mother, wearing a muffler and his greatcoat and fixing eyes of horror on the spot where Miss Foot, stouter and more like a wedding cake than ever in her over-trimmed virginal white muslin, performed discordant trills and flourishes at the old-fashioned organ.

Roddy, important, but still sulky, in a new morning suit. Uncle Frederick, huge and coarse-looking. Humphrey's aunt wearing a new jet-hung cape, and a bonnet trimmed with violets and a short black curly feather . . . Humphrey, waiting for her at the end of the aisle, thick-set and clumsy and—blurred, somehow, so that one didn't see him quite clearly. Vivienne's mother eager and excited, reminding you again of a child at a party and—Vivienne's father. As soon as she began to walk up the aisle, she realised that she was dreading this moment when she must meet Vivienne's father's eyes—those blue eyes that looked right into you. She'd never

minded before, but now suddenly she didn't want them to look right into her. They'ld see through the armour of her pride right into her soul, see things that she wouldn't look at herself, and didn't want anyone else to look at.

She had shrunk from meeting Vivienne's father ever since the beginning of her engagement. She didn't mind the others, who took for granted that she was marrying Humphrey for his money, but she felt ashamed before Vivienne's father, who took for granted that she was marrying him for love.

But, of course, one needn't meet his eyes. Her eyes were cast down beneath her wedding veil.

The service was even more dreamlike than everything else had been for the last few weeks. As she stood there, repeating the words after the Vicar, she had a curious sensation of going farther and farther away, till she looked down at it from an immeasurable distance, and they all seemed like pygmies, and she was a tiny doll-like figure decked out in white satin, saying words in a tiny little voice like the drone of an insect . . . all tiny, like puppets . . . a doll wedding . . . doll clergy-man . . . doll guests in tiny elaborate dresses. A spasm of merriment seized her . . . it was all she could do not to laugh aloud. If only they knew that they were like that . . . if only they knew that she wasn't here at all, that she was miles and miles away, watching it all, watching herself amongst it.

That feeling of unreality stayed with her when she went into the vestry. A toy vestry, tiny book and pens, dolls moving about, pretending to talk . . . puppets. Their strings were being pulled again . . . out of the vestry and down the aisle as Miss Foot, keyed up to a tense pitch of emotion, hurled forth the Wedding March in a storm of discords, and Macaulay put his fingers to his

ears with such an agonised gesture that his mother asked him anxiously if he'd got earache.

§

Things had come back to their normal sizes again when she reached the Hall, but still nothing seemed real to her. She felt now as if she were acting in a play, and must be very careful lest she should forget her part. As she smiled and moved about and spoke to people, she felt as if she had rehearsed the scene hundreds of times. The things that people said to her were unreal and yet familiar. They were giving her cues. Somewhere a critical audience waited. She mustn't make any mistake. Sometimes the people around her seemed to be her fellow-players, sometimes they seemed to be the critical audience that watched and listened, on the look-out for any slip.

"Thank you very much. . . ."

"Oh, yes, we shall be back by the end of next month."

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes feverishly bright, her hair soft and cloudy beneath the wedding veil. The dress, straight and plain, showed the graceful rounded body beneath it. She looked radiantly lovely, but that bloom of dreamy childishness that had been hers a few weeks ago had disappeared. There was already something hard in the brightness of her eyes, something set in the curves of her lovely mouth; there was a new poise and assurance in her manner, something that wasn't quite aggressiveness, and yet was assumed to meet criticism and defy it.

On the whole people approved of her.

"How lovely she looks."

"She seemed so much older since she got engaged."

"Yes. A girl grows up quickly once she gets engaged.

And the people who'd said that she was marrying him for his money suddenly weren't sure. Would she look as radiant as that if she were marrying him for money?

§

Upstairs in the bedroom, being dressed again by Cousin Geraldine. . . . The blue going away dress, a funny shade of dull blue that you didn't often see. A hat of the same colour. Cousin Geraldine in raptures. . . .

"My dear, it's perfect. The hat a little bit more forward. That's it . . . you're lovely, my dear. Now keep him well under from the beginning. Never let him get the upper hand."

Naomi shivered and drew back.

Downstairs, where the crowd of people were waiting, calling to her. Her cue again. She had to smile and wave her hand and answer back gaily. She mustn't forget her words or the scene would be spoilt. Out to the waiting carriage. Kiss Cousin Geraldine. Kiss Imogen, shutting your eyes and pretending that it was Cousin Geraldine because Imogen's kiss opened wounds that one couldn't afford to have opened to-day. Roddy, Moireen, Lily. . . .

"Good-bye . . . Good-bye . . . Good-bye!"

The journey, too, was all part of the play. Her words and actions came pat enough. She remembered them as if she'd rehearsed them a dozen times. He didn't give her many cues in words, but his very quietness and silence was a cue. His eyes watching her were cues. She repeated her part carefully, but with ease, like an actress who has studied it laboriously, but repeats the words as if she were saying them for the first time. That bright hard poise that was Cousin Geraldine . . . comments on the service, the reception, the scenery they

were passing . . . as if she were a stranger to herself and had to entertain both herself and this other stranger, this big middle-aged man who was travelling with her. Her real self wasn't there at all. It was far away, lost somewhere in a black forest. That panic horror that is the first sensation of the lost was descending upon her. ("I shall never get out. I shall never get out. I shall never get out. I'm lost. I shall never get out. Oh, God, it's so cold and dark and I must stay here for ever.")

§

Her husband rose as the train slowed down, and began to collect their traps.

"Here we are," he said.

She rose and looked at her watch.

"Splendidly on time," she commented brightly.

("Oh, God, it's so cold and dark, and I must stay here for ever.")

They drove to the hotel.

"It's *charming*. Right overlooking the sea. How clever of you to know a place like this!"

("I shall never get out. I'm lost. I shall never get out.")

She passed through the lounge slowly, her head held high, a faint smile on her lips. Up to the large palatial suite overlooking the sea. She glanced into a mirror as she went to the window. What a fool she had been not to have put some colour stuff on her cheeks and lips! They were as white as milk. Cousin Geraldine had offered her some rouge, but she'd never used it before, and it had seemed silly. She wished now that she'd used it. It was dreadful to look like this—white and frightened, like someone lost in a forest. She sat down on the

arm-chair by the window and looked out. A balcony with a wrought iron balustrade. Blue sea with white butterflies of ships on the horizon. That was her cue.

"How nice this is! I've always loved balconies."

"I hope it's all right," he said. "I wanted to get the best suite, but it had been engaged by someone else." Her cue again. She tried to say the words but they wouldn't come.

He turned from closing the door.

"Do you like it?" he said.

She didn't answer. She was lying motionless across her chair. She had fainted.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XVII

NAOMI looked out of her window. It was the sort of morning that she loved—an autumn mist and a sharp tang of frost in the air. The sun would come out later to turn the trees into a riot of red and gold. Then, with evening, the mist would gather again, and the sun would hang in it like a blood-red ball. . . .

She had returned home yesterday. The feeling of unreality had persisted throughout her honeymoon. Its enforced physical intimacy had brought no intimacy of spirit. Her husband was still a stranger whom she had to entertain. She exerted all her faculties to entertain him, using still that hard, bright self that she had borrowed from Cousin Geraldine. She studied his tastes, trying always to please him, to fulfil her part of the contract. He seemed satisfied, though it was difficult to tell what he was thinking. He was slow

and inarticulate and undemonstrative. She felt sometimes a quick, fierce irritation with him that frightened her. She mustn't—get like that. She had glimpses of possibilities that she'd never reckoned with. . . . Living with someone whose every word and look jarred intolerably upon your nerves, living with them in an intimacy that only love could make endurable. . . . Her marriage had seemed to her a sacrifice of self made in order to repay a debt of honour. She must go on seeing it like that. She must . . . she *must*. . . . It was the only way she could bear it. She'ld go through with it, head erect, but she must, she *must* see it like that. . . .

§

His aunt had been standing at the open front door of The Towers to receive them on their return. She looked prim and neat, like a housekeeper in her best clothes, the grey hair drawn tightly back into its uncompromising "bun," the pleasant wrinkled face shining. She wore a grey silk dress, whose lace collar was held together at the neck by a large old-fashioned brooch.

"Eh, lad," she said to Humphrey in broad Yorkshire, as the big man kissed her, "tha's looking champion."

Then she turned to Naomi and spoke with only a slight Northern burr. "You look bonnier than ever, my lass. Welcome home."

For all her pleasant smile, Naomi saw, or imagined that she saw, condemnation in the keen blue eyes. Her pride, more sensitive than ever since her marriage, was quick to resent it, and, in order to preserve that feeling of superiority that was essential to her, she concentrated her attention on this little woman's unfashionable appearance, her *gaucheries* of speech and manner. She

was charming to her in rather a patronising fashion, praising all her arrangements, begging her to stay on at The Towers. But Aunt Rachel was going the next day. She was going back to her Yorkshire moors, where she had a four-roomed cottage near the old farm. She hadn't wanted to come to The Towers, but Humphrey had asked her to come, and it had seemed her duty.

There was a sort of dispassionate suspension of judgment in her tone when she mentioned Humphrey and The Towers. Humphrey's wealth meant nothing to her. The Towers meant nothing to her. Humphrey, despite his wealth, was probably less worthy of honour and respect in her eyes than were the sturdy farmers who had been his forbears. He was a backslider. He'd left the land and joined the stream that flowed to the town. He'd "come South." . . . He'd succeeded, but his success did not justify him. Reserved and inarticulate as she was, she couldn't help showing something of the joy she felt at the thought of going back to her moors.

"Humphrey's cousin has the farm now," she said. "It was Humphrey's great-great-grandfather that had it first."

Her people hated mine, thought Naomi. They hounded them off their land, drove them away with their babies and their caravans. . . .

But though she tried to dislike and despise this little old woman with her dowdy clothes and North-country accent, she couldn't. There was about Aunt Rachel that elusive suggestion of sturdy independence, of gentle but unbreakable pride, that has its home in the country districts of the North. This little old woman would have met the highest in the land without embarrassment, tendering due respect without abating one atom of her dignity, and receiving respect in her turn as her due. She

belonged to the unchanging aristocracy of the land, the oldest and the noblest of all aristocracies. Its independence is as different from the aggressive, self-conscious independence of the townsman as is the sun from artificial light.

Patronise her as she would, Naomi had an uneasy feeling of inferiority. The keen blue eyes in the wrinkled face seemed to look through the trumpery furbelows of her newly acquired poise and see—— Whatever it was she saw, it was something that Naomi herself tried not to see. She felt as uncomfortable with the gentle old lady as if she were standing before her naked.

§

Humphrey went into the garden, and Aunt Rachel took Naomi on a tour of inspection through the house. Room after room. . . . Gradually Naomi's bright conventional comments ceased. She became silent. Humphrey's aunt put to flight the ghost of Cousin Geraldine, dragged aside the bright veils of insincerity. So strong was the force of her personality, that Naomi had to keep looking at her to be sure that she really was this tiny frail-looking shabby old lady. . . .

Aunt Rachel passed a door without opening it.

"It's my room," she said. "I brought a few things with me to be more homelike."

"Mayn't I see?" said Naomi.

Reluctantly, as it seemed, Humphrey's aunt opened the door.

A room that might have been a farm kitchen. A dresser, a wooden rocking-chair, a table covered with a red patterned table-cloth. Flowers in pots on the window-sill. A small bookshelf full of well-worn books—most

of them George Macdonald's—an old-fashioned workbox on the table with a half-knit sock near it, a patchwork cushion on the rocking-chair. A simple, old-fashioned room—as incongruous in this house as a daisy among orchids. And the figure of Humphrey's aunt, that had looked so strange and out-of-place in the other parts of the house, became suddenly natural and, as it were, inevitable here. About the two of them, the room and its mistress, hung a gracious dignity that the rest of the house conspicuously lacked.

"It's so peaceful," said Naomi, looking round.

Humphrey's aunt glanced at her, then said quietly and as if it were quite a natural thing to say: "You've not come to peace yet, my lass, have you?"

That panic fear that she didn't understand shot through Naomi's heart again—a fear of facing reality, of understanding what she had done.

She summoned the ghost of Cousin Geraldine to her and laughed—the hard tinkling laugh that was Cousin Geraldine's.

"Does anyone ever come to peace?" she said. "Peace always sounds so nice but one suspects that really it's horribly dull."

In silence Humphrey's aunt held the door open for her to pass out.

§

It appeared that Aunt Rachel had arranged to go away that afternoon, almost as soon as they returned.

"Oh, but—do stay just a little," pleaded Naomi. "I didn't know—— Somehow I thought you'ld be staying for a week or two. Do stay till to-morrow, at any rate . . . please."

She'd lost her airy, sophisticated manner. She was a child, afraid of the dark, pleading with its nurse to stay with it. . . . This aunt of Humphrey's was aloof and disapproving, and yet she felt her presence a protection. She felt somehow as if no ill could come to her while this unconquerable spirit in its frail body presided over the house.

"Don't go yet, please don't go yet."

"It's no use putting things off," said Humphrey's aunt enigmatically.

Naomi drew the rags of her pride about her, holding her young head high.

"I'm not—putting anything off."

The gentle, searching blue eyes looked at her.

"Tell me what you're thinking," cried Naomi impulsively.

"You've done a foolish thing, lass," said Humphrey's aunt slowly, "but you're plucky, and by God's goodness our muddles straighten themselves out."

"I don't know what you mean," said Naomi, with flaming cheeks.

Then Humphrey came in from the garden—expansive, smiling his pleasure in both of them and in being home again.

He looked proudly round at the pink and gold drawing-room, then, turning to Naomi, he said: "Well, do you like being whoam?"

"It's splendid, Humphrey," she said, smiling, and linking her arm in his.

She was defying this old woman who watched them silently. She was saying: There! See what a good wife I make him. Could any woman, even if she really loved him, make him a better?

§

The butler had brought in the tea, and Naomi sat down behind the low table. Her house, her tea-table, her husband . . . it was all suddenly so ridiculous, that she wanted to laugh, but she didn't because she knew that if once she began to laugh she would never be able to stop.

"So you *will* go?" she said lightly to Humphrey's aunt, who sat there near her, so small, so slight, so unapproachable and so unconquerable. "Can't I say anything to keep you?"

"No," said Humphrey's aunt, "I want to get home."

"We want you, you know," said Humphrey.

His aunt threw him a quick, half-amused glance.

"I don't—belong here, lad. I want to get back to where I belong."

To where she belonged. . . . Clean, bare, white-washed rooms, the busy stir of a farm in the grey dawn, the faint ammoniac smell of the animals in the yard mingled with the fragrance of the little old-fashioned flower garden, the wide open stretches of the moors, things that her family had known for generations. A bleak stone farmhouse standing foursquare to the winds, that was where she belonged. . . . Naomi looked around her at the over-elaborate room, restless and inharmonious as are all over-elaborate things.

Then her eyes turned to Humphrey, who stood at the window with his back to her, gazing out at the garden, his hands in his pockets. Broad shoulders, thick thighs, a heavy muscular frame. . . . He should have been at the plough. He would have been at the plough if he hadn't had a silly, romantic, little mother who'd given him as her sole heritage a love of glittering trumpery like this house, like this room, like herself—for it had been the brightness of her eyes, the redness of her lips,

the dusky flush of her smooth cheeks, that had made him desire her. He had loved her at first sight without knowing anything of her real self. He still loved her without knowing anything of her real self, satisfied even with the false sparkle that was Cousin Geraldine's.

No, she doesn't belong here, thought Naomi, and I don't, and Humphrey doesn't. . . . Only Humphrey's mother belonged . . . a foolish little ghost, flitting about this ridiculous fairy palace fashioned in the stuff of her untrained imagination. Only the ghost was real here. The real people—Naomi, Humphrey, Humphrey's aunt—were ghosts.

Aunt Rachel went as soon as they had finished tea.

She wore the jet-trimmed cape and the bonnet with violets. Humphrey's new motor stood at the door, its smart uniformed chauffeur holding the door open.

"I'll send for my bits of furniture," she said.

The rocking-chair, the dresser, the kitchen table with its red cloth, the bookshelves with their worn and treasured George Macdonalds, imprisoned in this house of unreal splendour like princesses in an ogre's castle. . . . How they must be longing to escape, to follow their mistress back to the clean austerity of their Yorkshire home.

"We'ld love to keep them," said Naomi dreamily, and Humphrey laughed as if she'd made a joke, yet rather uncomfortably, because it was unkind to make fun of poor old Aunt Rachel's bits of furniture.

When she'd gone, they went back to the drawing-room together.

He closed the door and stood looking at her, naïvely happy, starkly simple in his joy in his home and his love of her. When alone with her like this, his face softened, losing the ruggedness, the tense suspicious lines that it had acquired in his struggle for success. She had learnt

that he had singularly little knowledge of the world, and that his perceptions were not keen. He was slow and heavy in mind as well as body. He had inherited from his Northern forbears, not only a perfection of physique, but also a tenaciousness of purpose, a dogged determination not to be beaten, that had served him well in his struggle. In the world of business he had learned to be shrewd, suspicious, and alert, but it was like an armour that he wore when he went out to battle, and laid aside when he returned. Outside his world of business, he was as guileless and trusting as a child.

He had retained, too, the faith of his childhood and he still repeated nightly on his knees by his bedside the prayers that he had learnt in his Yorkshire home. . . . At such times as those Naomi felt that she could learn to love him as a mother loves her child—that, of course, would be the solution of the problem—but there were other times. . . .

Something in his smile now as he came across the room to her set her heart thumping against her ribs. Her own smile grew set and fixed, but she did not falter. She steeled herself, as she always did, to endure his embrace, shutting her eyes, bracing her whole body as his arms closed round her and his lips bent down to hers. The shrinking she always felt from his embraces afforded her a strange perverted satisfaction. It seemed to still temporarily the sense of guilt that, unacknowledged, yet nagged persistently at her heart. It was as if she said: I'm paying the price to the last farthing. I'm not cheating anyone.

He released her and stood with her at the window, one arm still about her. He wore a shy, boyish smile that sat oddly on his rugged face.

"Well," he said, "we're whoam at last. You like it, don't you, lass?"

"Of course."

The set smile was still on her lips, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes hard and bright. . . .

"You think you're going to be happy here?"

"Of course."

"You see, somehow I knew it would be all right. You were such a child. Too young to know what love was. I knew that marriage so often brings love. It was a big risk but I took it, because I loved you so terribly. . . . And—oh, my dear, I've been so thankful, so unspeakably thankful, to find that you were happy with me. . . ."

He'd taken it all at its face value—the Cousin Geraldine gaiety, the ruthless repression of her shrinking. . . .

"Now I want you to say just what you want altered in the place," he said, "and we'll alter it. It's got to be exactly as you want it."

"I don't want anything altered," she said. "I want it exactly as it is."

(I'm letting him keep his hideous house, just as he likes it. I'm willing to live in a house I hate, a house that all my friends laugh at. I'm not cheating anyone. I'm—paying—the—price.)

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "I hoped you'ld like it. From the minute I saw you, I had you in my mind when I planned things. . . . It was the house my mother had wanted, of course, but somehow I thought you'ld like it too. . . ." He turned away from the window. "Shall we go into the garden now, or are you tired?"

Her heart contracted with an odd, impersonal pain. He was so supremely happy in his love for her and for this house. . . .

"You go into the garden," she said. "I'ld like to look round the house alone."

§

When he'd gone she went straight to the room with the rocking-chair and the farm kitchen dresser—the clean, sweet room that was like a little chapel in the house.

She had known as soon as she first saw it that she must purge her soul here and start afresh. She locked the door and then turned to face herself. . . . Deliberately, for the first time since she had heard the words "She isn't Imogen's daughter, you know," she relaxed her self-control, deliberately let the ice round her heart melt. She dropped upon the floor, her head resting on the patchwork cushion of the wooden rocking-chair, and her body was shaken with a sudden tempest of sobs. It was as if a dam had burst. The tears she had cheated herself of for so long found outlet at last. Her frustrated love for Imogen, her loneliness and fear and unhappiness, her shame and humiliation, her terror of this marriage that her pride had driven her to, her shrinking and bewilderment, all had their due in that passionate storm of tears.

And lying across the chair, her head on the patchwork cushion that smelt of lavender, she seemed to be lying in the arms of Humphrey's aunt, sobbing out her heart on that frail old bosom.

At last she raised her head and sat back upon the hearthrug. She felt exhausted but at peace, as if she had purged and clarified her soul. The ice round her heart had melted. She had become herself again. It was as if she met an old friend after a long parting. Yet, for all the peace that had come to her, she hadn't faced one thing, because she hadn't yet the strength or the courage to face it. Hidden deep in her, unadmitted, unrecognised, was the knowledge that her marriage was a sin. She couldn't face that knowledge yet. She was like a child

who cries "I didn't do it" when confronted with the evidence of his guilt. She had married to pay a debt of honour. There had been no other course open to her. She clung to that conviction, pushing the half-glimpsed knowledge of the truth out of sight, happy in the new sense of peace that her long-cheated tears had brought to her.

That night she had the first dreamless, refreshing sleep that she had had since her marriage.

§

So she had awakened to the keen beauty of the autumn morning. Leaning out of the window, looking at the mist-veiled fire of the autumn trees, feeling the tang of the frost and the caress of the sun as they fought for possession of her, she felt happy, refreshed, and full of confidence. She was proud and passionate, but generous and healthy-minded. Her youth was recuperative. It turned naturally from sickness to health, from despair to hope. She was young and the world lay before her. Her blood flowed richly in her veins. She would make something worth making of her life. . . .

One of those sudden ecstasies that she had known at intervals from her childhood swept over her. She felt uplifted, exultant. The mist-veiled red and gold of the trees became suddenly so shatteringly lovely as to take away her breath. A sense of power as well as elation possessed her. She was unconquerable. Life was a battle, exhilarating, intoxicating. She set her white teeth and almost laughed aloud in the joy of conflict and the sure confidence of victory.

Humphrey was in the dining-room when she entered it. Despite its over-elaborate decoration and ornate

furnishing, it looked cheerful enough this morning, with the cold autumn sunshine streaming through the windows, and a bright wood fire on the hearth. He was standing by the fire, holding out his hands to the blaze. He had got up early to go into the garden. He was tremendously proud of the garden and loved to wander about in it. He turned to her with his slow smile as she entered.

"Tha looks gradely, lass," he said. "It suits thee to be whoam."

He nearly always dropped into broad Yorkshire when alone with her. It was his "little language."

She smiled, her own smile, sweet, unaffected.

"It's such a wonderful morning," she said.

Friendship with him, real friendship. That, of course, was the whole solution. Love? The tiny piece of Cousin Geraldine that had lodged unnoticed in that secret corner of her heart where she wouldn't look stirred faintly. *Was* there such a thing as love? If there was, it didn't last. Only friendship lasted. . . .

It was to be the first normal day of their married life. Humphrey was going up to town to his office. The post had come in, and he was looking through his letters—a formidable pile of them, business letters. He was frowning as he read. Already he'd forgotten her. She'd taken her normal place in his scheme of things, a beautiful mistress for his new house. She belonged to his home. He left her there in the morning, and found her there again when he returned at night. She didn't come into the real business of his life. . . .

She turned her eyes to the window, where the gardens lay bathed in mist and sun. On flowers and shrubs hung webs of gleaming gossamer. (The fairies' lace curtains hanging out to dry. . . .) That feeling of exaltation, the ecstasy of confidence and hope, still upheld her. She'd take over part of the garden and look after it

entirely herself. She'ld make something beautiful of it. The longing to create that she could never satisfy surged up afresh in her heart. . . .

§

She hadn't told Imogen that she had come back, and, when breakfast was over and Humphrey had gone to business and she had given her household orders, she set off to the Hall.

She was looking forward to meeting Imogen again. She wanted to show her independence of her, to patronise her just a little—no longer the "gipsy brat" but a married woman of position. . . .

Walking along the main road, she thought of the day when she and Vivienne and Peter had come by this road to laugh at The Towers and its owner, the day when Humphrey had first seen her, the day when Peter had asked her to marry him. . . .

She passed through Lainsforth without seeing anyone she knew, and then, feeling suddenly shy of meeting people, struck off through the fields to Deerford and the Hall.

Imogen was in the little morning-room, sewing, when Naomi entered unannounced. She looked up in surprise and said: "My dear, why didn't you let me know you were back?"

Then she bestirred herself to entertain her, as if she were a visitor, talking impersonally, repeating pieces of local news. As Naomi commented on the news and asked questions, she felt a bitter pang at her heart. She wasn't the married daughter, taken for granted, or lovingly welcomed, in her old home. No need to keep up that farce. She was a neighbour paying a call, who had to be suitably entertained.

Roddy was at the factory, of course. He'ld be so sorry to miss her. But she and Humphrey must come to dinner. Could they come to-morrow? Cousin Geraldine was going back to town this evening. She was in the village now. Naomi must wait till she returned. Wasn't it a wonderful autumn? Would Naomi come and look at the chrysanthemums? They were better than she ever remembered them. . . .

Naomi followed her into the hall.

"Come through the drawing-room," said Imogen. "It's shorter. . . ."

The drawing-room. . . . The pretty L-shaped room with the French window, where Naomi had stood and heard Cousin Geraldine saying, "It's been maddening for her to have to spend money on this gipsy's child that she might have spent on her own boy." A wave of nausea flowed unexpectedly over her, and her heart beat unevenly. She couldn't, she *couldn't*, go into that room.

"Oh, no," she said breathlessly, "let's go out of the front, because I want to see the rest of the garden."

They went out to the garden and the little greenhouse. Somehow, Naomi hadn't been prepared for the effect the place had on her. It tugged poignantly at her heart. It had been her home, every corner of it was fraught with memories; and Imogen was showing her round as if she were a casual visitor.

Back to the house and the pleasant sunny morning-room. She'd done her first lessons at the little gate-legged table, and now she was a stranger. It all meant nothing to Imogen. Why should it mean anything?

In the morning-room, Imogen turned to her suddenly, and said, as if with an effort: "Are you happy, Naomi?"

She spoke kindly, almost tenderly, but as ever her

kindness came too late. Naomi answered lightly, " Yes, thank you," and began to talk about the new Town Hall they were building in Lainsforth.

§

She went soon after that, the pain still tugging at her heart as she walked down the overgrown, neglected drive. It didn't want her, it had never owned her, but it had been her home, more truly her home than The Towers would ever be. At the gate she met Cousin Geraldine, who tinkled at her excitedly. How *nice* to see her again and had she had a good time away? She was *sure* she was very happy (knowing smiles and nods). And now what was she going to do with herself? She must make a point of running up to town at least two days a week for shopping and bridge. She'ld propose her a member of a bridge club that she belonged to. Because one lived in the country, one needn't let oneself run to seed, as Imogen had done. She must come up to lunch at Cousin Geraldine's flat next week and meet a few of her friends. After all, one must keep in touch with things. It was one's duty.

" I'm afraid I shan't be able to come up to town much," said Naomi. " I shall be so busy at home."

Cousin Geraldine laughed, half-amused, half-contemptuous.

" I'd hoped you weren't going to be one of *that* sort, my dear."

Then suddenly, surprisingly, she asked Naomi to lend her five pounds. She'd left her cheque-book at home, and she didn't want to bother Imogen. She'ld send her a cheque as soon as she got back to London. Naomi, rather embarrassed, handed her the money. Cousin Geraldine, magnificently self-possessed, stuffed

it into her purse, and began to chatter about village gossip. Lily was actually engaged to Macaulay Bruce at last. Rumour said that he hadn't known that he was engaged to her till someone congratulated him, but that was probably untrue. Cousin Geraldine meant to come to Deerford for the wedding, because a bridegroom in a muffler and a chest protector would look too quaint. But, of course, the most important local engagement was Cynthia Marlow's. She was engaged to Clive Bannerman. One had rather thought that Moireen Silver had had her eye in that direction, but apparently not, as she'd seemed more pleased than anyone by the engagement. . . .

§

They said good-bye, and Naomi went on to the Vicarage. . . . Up the tunnel of yew trees and out into the autumn sunshine at the front door. The house seemed somehow to hold a warmer welcome for her than the Hall had held.

Mrs. Darrent fussed and fluttered about her as eagerly and excitedly as if she were really her daughter, and the Vicar smiled benignly in the background. Their simple joy in her, their utter taking for granted of her happiness, touched her deeply. They questioned her about The Towers and her honeymoon.

"You aren't in my parish, but I shall come worrying you till you're sick of me," said the Vicar, twinkling.

Yes, Moireen was still with them. She was out just now. She'ld be so sorry to miss Naomi. She was so fond of her and often spoke of her. . . .

There was a letter from Peter. A bald recital of all that he had done since he last wrote. He hadn't heard of her marriage yet.

And there was another piece of news. They'd kept the most exciting to the end. They'd only heard this morning. It was Vivienne. She'd said that she was going to write to Naomi and tell her. . . . She wanted to leave College and go on the stage. Her Year had been acting a play, and an uncle of one of the students, a London actor, had been there and had offered Vivienne a "job." It was in a sort of concert party beginning in Manchester—glorified pierrots, called the Blue Birds. If she didn't take it, she might never get another offer like it. It seemed a pity to leave College without a degree but—she didn't want a degree and she did want to go on the stage. The Vicar was bewildered, but still proud of her.

"She impressed this man at once," he said to Naomi. "She was the only one of them he noticed. . . . Of course, I'd rather she'd stayed on at College and got her degree, but—she must do what she thinks best. I want her to be happy. . . ."

Vivienne . . . how suddenly and sharply their paths were dividing. Schoolgirls together only a year or two ago . . . lying side by side in Vivienne's little white and blue bed. . . . Now she was married to Humphrey Belson of The Towers and Vivienne was going on to the stage.

"It's nothing spectacular at present," went on the Vicar. "Touring in the provinces. But one always has to begin at the bottom and Vivienne says that she'll like the work. She'll get on. She'll get on. She's a clever girl, you know."

He had altered all his ambitions for her to meet her desires. A month ago he'd seen her as a don or even principal of one of the more important women's colleges. Now, as confidently, as vividly, he saw her as a famous actress.

"There are temptations in that life," he said, "but Vivienne's a good girl. A very good girl."

Mrs. Darrent was agog with excitement over the news of Lily's engagement, but she spoke of it without the sneers with which everyone else was referring to it.

"I'm so glad. They're both so nice and so suited to each other. They're both fond of collecting wild flowers, you know, too. There's nothing like a hobby in common for young married people. . . . And I want you to help me at the Sale of Work next month, dear. I've got *quite* a new idea for it. I feel so excited about it that I simply can't think of anything else. You must come to tea with me and I'll tell you all about it. I'm sure you want to run round and see everyone this morning, don't you?"

"I must just go round the garden first."

"Dear, there's nothing in it."

Oh, but there was. . . . There was Peter, very solemn, in the stables, cleaning out his rabbit hutches; there was Tinker with one of the Vicar's bedroom slippers in his mouth; there was Vivienne buying hawthorn berries. ("Are those cherries *quite* fresh, my good woman?"); there was herself running across the lawn, athrill with a new experience . . . "I've seen a Jewish Rabbi, I've seen a Jewish Rabbi. . . ."

"You see, there's nothing, dear," said the Vicar's wife. "The frost caught the last of the roses last night."

She kissed her affectionately at the door.

"You look so well and happy, dear, it does one's heart good to see you."

Naomi smiled crookedly. What would she have said if she'd seen her yesterday, sobbing her heart out on Humphrey's aunt's patchwork cushion? But that was yesterday. To-day she *was* well and happy. . . . The warm, loving welcome of the Vicarage had restored all her confidence and hope.

§

She felt rather shy when she set off through the village, but she soon found that the nine days' wonder of her marriage was forgotten. She was taken for granted as Mrs. Belson of The Towers. The local interest centred upon Lily's engagement. She met Lily herself just outside the village shop. (There were still a few discoloured "treasures" in a corner of the window. No one had bought any since Vivienne and Naomi stopped "collecting" them.) Lily looked fatter and sleeker. She had lost her air of anxiety, and her blue eyes protruded less. Having decided to marry Macaulay, she had wisely decided at the same time that he combined in himself all the attributes of a perfect husband. "He's so clever," she said to Naomi. "He's made a table for his study that you could hardly tell from a real one, and he's got a collection of two thousand wild flowers. Found them all himself. . . . And he's been *so* well-educated, you know."

She made this statement with an air of triumph. It was, of course, common knowledge that Humphrey hadn't been educated at all.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XVIII

Naomi awoke the next morning to a feeling of happy anticipation, and at first she couldn't think why. Then she remembered. She was going to dine at the Hall. She was going to see Roddy again. . . . It seemed years since she had seen him. The wedding, of course, didn't count. Roddy, morose and important in his new

morning coat, showing people to their places—part of the puppet show that in its turn had been part of a dream. But she would meet the real Roddy again to-night. . . .

"Come home early this evening," she said to her husband as he was setting off. "Remember that we're going to dine at the Hall."

He was delighted at receiving orders from her in this tone of wifely proprietorship, but slightly sulky at the prospect of spending an evening away from home.

"Oh, but think of the hundreds and thousands of evenings you'll have to spend at home," she said, smiling.

He looked at her fixedly, without replying.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"I want to remember you just as you are now. Yesterday I found myself forgetting just how you looked when you smiled like that. I wanted to remember and couldn't." He dropped suddenly into his broadest Yorkshire. "Eh, lass, tha's a bonny wench."

She smiled again.

"You oughtn't to waste your time at the office trying to remember how I smile."

To herself she was saying: He doesn't really love me any more than I love him. He doesn't know me or want to know me. It's just my hair and skin and eyes and the way I smile. . . .

The thought brought her a curious sensation of relief, as if part of the secret weight of guilt had dropped from her heart.

When he came home she was ready, dressed in a dress of old gold that showed off the lines of her graceful young figure. He wanted to walk round the garden with her again before he went to change. She was chafing with impatience, but she hid all traces of it and acquiesced, letting him draw her arm through his and stroll with her

down the moonlit paths. From the end of the yew path he turned again to the house.

"It's champion, isn't it?" he said softly.

It looked in the moonlight too fantastic to be real, with its turrets and battlements and domes.

She murmured vague assent, thinking of Roddy. What would he be like? In one of his black depressions, or full of excited enthusiasm? She could see his face as vividly as if it had been actually before her, far more vividly than she saw the fantastic palace that her husband was looking at. Would things at the factory be worse or better? Would those shrouded shapes in his room upstairs still be his torture and delight?

"It seems to me," her husband was saying slowly, "that it's the best thing to do with money, to build a place like this. It's what those others did, those men who made money by trade in Elizabeth's time, you know. They built beautiful houses with it, and their houses stand to-day."

She realised that he was breaking through his reserve to tell her something that belonged to his secret self, and she realised, too, that what he said was infinitely pathetic. This atrocity by the side of the gracious Elizabethan manors. . . .

"You ought to go to change," she said gently; "we shall never be there in time."

He turned slowly to walk towards the house with her.

"That's why I had it built so well," he was saying, "everything of the best. I've spent on it far more than I meant to, but I wanted to do my bit with the rest. It ought to stand as long as theirs have done."

"Of course it will," she said, and found herself hoping that he would never come to see it as other people saw it. "Of course it will, but—do hurry, Humphrey. I said we'd be there before half past."

He was ready at last and the big car, that neither of them used much, was at the door.

§

They drove to the Hall in silence. Naomi's heart quickened as they turned into the drive. Would it ever seem ordinary, natural, to come here, as if one were coming to any other house?

Imogen looked young and very pretty in black. There was an unusual cordiality in her voice and manner that made Naomi smile. Poor Imogen! She was so determinedly doing her duty by them. She hated entertaining, hated having to come out of her shell to be the conventional hostess dealing out smiles and small-talk. To Naomi she was specially affectionate in tone and manner. There was still a nagging doubt at her heart. Had she failed in her duty to this child in some vital, irremediable way? She was sparing no effort this evening in order to prove to herself that she never had spared any effort. . . .

"Will you leave your cloak in my bedroom, dear?"

"Where's Roddy? In his room?"

"Yes."

Up the stairs two steps at a time. Surely she'd never been away. Surely this last month was all a dream. . . . He was just coming out of his roon, closing the door behind him.

"Oh, Roddy . . . Roddy darling!"

She was in his arms. They clung to each other on the narrow landing for a second, then he released her and held her at arm's length. He looked smiling, happy.

"Well, aren't you smart! I'ld hardly have recognised you."

"Roddy, it's so lovely to see you again. . . ."

Her happiness was almost more than she could bear. There wasn't any past or future. There was only the present . . . her eyes on Roddy's, her hands in his. He was still smiling down at her.

"You look jolly well. . . . You're happy?"

"Oh, yes, yes."

"Naomi, darling, I felt such a beast when I realised —things, after you'd gone away. I'd been such a cad about it. I must have spoilt it for you. You'ld never have let me down as I let you down."

"Oh, you didn't, Roddy, you didn't."

"I did. I feel so ashamed of it now. For a man to expect his sister to stay unmarried just because—I see now what a selfish ass I was."

"I'm not your sister, Roddy."

He bent down and kissed her again, laughing.

"You *are* my sister. I won't be robbed of you."

They went downstairs, hand in hand. Imogen was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"Doesn't she look fine, mother?" said Roddy.

"Darlings, look after people in the drawing-room. I want to go into the kitchen for a second to make sure that things are all right."

She had invited several other people, to relieve the situation of any embarrassment it might otherwise have had. Mr. Borrowdale and Dr. Fuller were there with their wives. Moireen was there in a dress of shimmering silver. Naomi saw them all through a sort of haze. That languorous ecstasy of happiness was still upon her. She didn't try to analyse it or explain it. She simply surrendered herself to it, let it flow over her in waves of warm, sensuous delight. She was talking to Dr. Fuller, but she didn't know what he was saying or what she was replying. Her eyes and ears were still on Roddy as he

stood, glowing and handsome, by Moireen. When he turned to her and smiled, her pulses pounded in her ears and her breath came unevenly. She went in to dinner still in a dream.

Once when she addressed Imogen by her Christian name, Roddy looked up in smiling surprise and said :

"Don't stand her cheek, mother. I suppose she thinks she owns the world now that she's married."

Dr. Fuller sat next to her at the dinner-table. His gentle murmuring voice was vaguely soothing. One needn't listen to it. Her eyes roamed idly round the table. They fell upon Humphrey with a curious shock of surprise. In her dreamlike state she took him for a second as a stranger. What was he doing here among these people who belonged to her, whom she'd known from childhood? And then the mist cleared. . . . This was her husband. Her eyes went back to Roddy, and the knowledge came to her so suddenly and with such violence that it seemed as if something had sprung at her throat and were choking the life out of her. She loved Roddy, loved him with all the strength and passion of her nature. What she'd taken for the bond of kinship had been a spiritual tie uniting them. They belonged to each other. And—she'd let him go. By her marriage with the stranger opposite she'd destroyed her every hope of happiness. She faced the truth about her marriage at last, tore the last veil of dishonesty from her eyes, saw the foolish pleas of "honour," "self-sacrifice," dissolve into nothing. She'd married a man she didn't love, simply because her pride had been wounded. There was no "honour," only cowardice and self-love. Rather than endure a passing humiliation, rather than take her own burden upon her own shoulders, she had deliberately wrecked not only her own life, but that of

Humphrey, perhaps of Roddy too. She saw her marriage at last as it was—the wild, pitiful "hitting back" of a headstrong child. Terror and bewilderment closed upon her, and yet she'd only to turn to Roddy for that radiance of ecstasy, heedless of reason, heedless of yesterday or to-morrow, to flood her whole being again.

§

They went into the drawing-room, where Imogen's housemaid brought coffee. Naomi felt a sudden fear lest everyone looking at her should know what had happened to her. It seemed impossible that she should look just as she'd always looked, that everyone should not be able to read her secret on her face. But they behaved to her as if everything were the same as before, and, despite the chaos of terror and ecstasy in her heart, she responded automatically to the calls made upon her. She returned the fugitive friendly smile of Imogen's housemaid as she took her coffee-cup, listened with apparent interest to Mr. Borrowdale's opinion on the political situation, answered intelligently Dr. Fuller's questions about the part of the coast where she had spent her honeymoon. . . . But all her thoughts were strained to where Roddy stood, leaning against the mantelpiece, smiling down at Moireen.

He looked so handsome, so vital . . . clean-cut sensitive lips, dark smiling eyes . . . young and clean and eager. All the old moodiness and discontent seemed to have dropped from him as he stood there with Moireen. . . .

She'd forgotten how pretty Moireen was, with her golden hair, her pink and white cheeks, her blue eyes.

. . . She hadn't realised that Moireen would be staying so long at the Vicarage.

Dreamily she heard Mrs. Fuller say: "The next big local wedding will be Cynthia Marlow's, I suppose." And Mrs. Borrowdale: "Yes, Clive Bannerman's a good match. The Marlows are delighted about it."

Clive Bannerman . . . Naomi's thoughts travelled back to that afternoon in The Towers' garden. Moireen, smiling up into Clive Bannerman's face . . . Moireen's sweet, laughing voice: "Clive, darling, you must protect me, you mustn't leave me for a moment. . . ."

The girl had turned from Roddy to say:

"Yes, it's wonderful, isn't it? We were all so delighted about it."

Her lovely face was serene, unclouded, and yet it had seemed for a second to grow small and pinched-looking. . . . This engagement was a bitter draught for her. She had built all her hopes on a marriage with Clive Bannerman. With a flash of insight, Naomi saw the fear that lay hidden behind the serenity of the blue eyes. . . . Flitting to and fro among the guests at a smart house-party, charming, popular, showing this eager, flattering interest in each of them, a great help to her hostess. . . . Petted and popular but not quite on the same footing as the other guests. Invited on the unspoken condition that she made herself charming. . . . Confident at first of a brilliant marriage . . . then disappointments as unexpected as inexplicable (Clive Bannerman hadn't been the first) . . . and the sudden searing vision of a future in which she should be neither young nor charming and yet a poor dependant. . . . They would stand by her, of course, ask her still to their houses, letting her take on more and more duties as a matter of course. She'd seen it happen to others, but never till this last bitter disappointment (she'd been so

sure of Clive Bannerman) had she faced the possibility of its happening to her. The facing it had broken her nerve. That was why she'd refused two invitations to house-parties this autumn, and was still at the Vicarage ("Darling Auntie *needs* someone. Vivienne's the only girl and, of course, Vivienne's so wrapped up in her career"). That was why she was smiling at Roddy like that. (She'd aimed too high . . . she wasn't going to risk another failure of that sort. . . . Better aim lower and make sure of it. . . .)

Naomi watched them, her perceptions clarified by her love, her heart racing unevenly. Roddy wasn't smiling now. He was listening earnestly to what Moireen was saying, asking questions in a quick eager voice. She strained her ears to catch what they were talking about. It was sculpture. Moireen had been staying last year in the house of a famous sculptor in London. The daughters had been fellow-guests of hers at a country house-party, and they had invited her to stay with them for the Season. (Moireen's clear blue eyes scanning her fellow-guests, picking out with unerring instinct those who were likely to be useful to her. . . .) She hadn't mentioned it before, because she hadn't realised that it would interest anyone here. She'd known nothing of Roddy's sculpture. But now a casual word had revealed his interest in it, and she was talking to him with her pretty, deprecating air of knowledge. Technical phrases tripped easily off her tongue. Famous names received a pat here, a shrug there. Roddy was listening with a sort of eager reverence, his dark eyes shining, his whole face alight. Naomi wanted to cry out to him, "Oh, but don't you understand? She knows nothing about it. They're just—words she's picked up. They mean nothing to her. She can talk like that about anything. It's one of the tricks of her trade."

§

Imogen sat at the other side of the room with Humphrey. He was talking to her, and she was listening with her air of weary resignation as if she were saying: "I must do this. . . . it will soon be over."

She asked Moireen to sing. Moireen had a clear voice, expressionless but sweet and true. She looked lovely as she stood there at the piano, her blue eyes gazing dreamily into the distance. Naomi's eyes were on Roddy. She was digging her teeth into her lips, clenching her hands till the nails dug into her palms. It was torture to her to see the look in his eyes as he watched Moireen, to know that the fire that ran in her veins at the sight of him ran in his at the sight of this girl. What a nightmare tangle, what a cruel punishment for her pride! If she hadn't married Humphrey, if Roddy had ever for a minute thought of her as a possible mate, instead of first as a sister, and then, almost before she'd ceased to be his sister, as another man's wife. . . . Oh, if, if, if . . . (God, I can't go on living if he doesn't love me. Oh, God, let him love me. I don't care about Humphrey, about anything. Let him love me, let him love me. . . . I'll pay for it afterwards in any way You like. . . .)

The song was ended. The smiling blue eyes met Roddy's. Roddy smiled tremulously in response. The pain in Naomi's heart sharpened to an agony. She felt a dull surprise that you could suffer like that and still go on living.

Moireen was talking to Imogen and Humphrey now, and Roddy came across the room to Naomi. He was flushed and smiling. Naomi knew why. There had been a lingering kindness in the blue eyes as Moireen glanced at him in passing.

He sat on the low stool by Naomi's chair.

"You've quite forgiven me, Namy?" he said.

"What for?"

Her voice and smile were steady. She had herself well in hand.

"For being a fool about your marriage."

"Of course."

"I didn't understand then. I do now."

She moistened her lips and smiled again.

"Is it——?"

"It's Moireen. Say you're glad, Namy."

"I'm glad," she said obediently.

"She doesn't know yet. I mayn't have a dog's chance but——"

But that lingering smile had given him hope.

He sat, his arms clasped about his knees, his eyes staring dreamily in front of him, a lock of his dark hair falling over his brow.

"Did you hear about her staying with the Lombards?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it wonderful? I hadn't realised till to-night that she was—interested in that sort of thing. She's so —modest. She'ld never parade knowledge as some people do."

"Because she hasn't any, Roddy. It's just patter, jargon. She can talk about everything like that. It's part of her stock-in-trade."

She didn't say it aloud. She sat gazing stonily in front of her.

"Naomi, I'm going to show her my things." He spoke as one who comes to a sudden momentous decision. "I've never shown them to anyone except you, but she knows. She—understands. She'll tell me if they're any good. I'll go by what she says. If she says they

aren't any good, I'll chuck it. If she says they are, I'll chuck the factory."

His dark eyes were still dreamy. He was looking into the future—a glamorous, rose-coloured future. She'ld say that they were good, of course. He'ld chuck the factory. They'ld leave Deerford and go to London. They'ld be poor but they wouldn't care. He'ld work and she'ld inspire him. Inspire and help and comfort him. Together they'ld succeed. . . .

"Wish me luck, Namy."

"Good luck, Roddy."

"I'm a walking bundle of conceit to-night. I'm sure that she'll say they're all right."

§

Naomi glanced across the room to where Imogen and Moireen sat talking together. Humphrey had joined the other men. Imogen was talking earnestly and confidentially and Moireen was listening intently. There was a suggestion of some secret bond between them. Naomi could guess what they were talking about. For all her air of listlessness, Imogen's eyes and ears were keen enough where Roddy was concerned. She'd seen what Naomi had seen. She was urging on Moireen, as she had once urged on Naomi, the importance of Roddy's staying at the factory. Moireen was assenting. Oh, yes, Moireen's small, expensively-clad feet wanted to tread the easiest way. She'ld play for safety and security, for money to buy the pretty-pretties she couldn't live without. There wasn't in her anything of the dream woman whom Naomi could see in Roddy's eyes, the woman who would risk poverty and failure with him. Oh, no, Moireen wasn't like that. . . .

"But, Roddy—suppose she doesn't *know*?"

"Know? Of course she knows. Didn't you hear her? She knows all there is to know about it. She's marvellous. I've been a fool, Namy. . . . Because she was so pretty, I took it for granted that she hadn't a brain. But now quite lately, quite suddenly, I've got to know her and—— Oh, she's wonderful, isn't she?"

He had to talk about her, of course, because he couldn't talk about anything else. Every word he spoke was a sword, cutting deeper, deeper, into Naomi's heart. She answered evenly with set, smiling lips.

"I hardly know her, Roddy."

"No, of course. I suppose you don't. You got engaged just about the time she came, didn't you? You must get to know her, Naomi. You'll like her."

She stood up suddenly because she couldn't endure it any longer, and went across the room as if to examine a bowl of flowers that stood on a table between the two windows.

"You didn't grow these, Imogen?"

"No, my dear. I got them in Lainsforth. . . ."

Her rising had disturbed the groups. Imogen rose too.

"Shall we have a game of cards?"

The rest of the evening passed in a dream. Roddy and Moireen did not play cards. They sat by the fire talking together in undertones. . . .

§

In the motor going home Naomi leant back and closed her eyes. Though her eyes were closed she could still see Roddy and Moireen as she'd seen them in the Hall drawing-room . . . talking together confidentially, obviously forgetful of everyone but

each other. It was like a picture branded upon her eyelids. Humphrey was discussing the evening. He admired Imogen, liked Roddy, and had enjoyed his conversation with Dr. Fuller and Mr. Borrowdale.

"They're both very interesting men," he was saying in his slow, heavy voice.

Then he looked at Naomi, where she lay back in her seat, her dark shining lashes sweeping her pale cheeks, her red lips compressed.

"You're tired out, my lass," he said in sudden concern. "Have you a headache?"

"No . . . I'm all right."

His voice became tender, compassionate. He slipped his arm round her. "You mustn't overdo it, you know," he said. "You're little more than a child, after all."

She could endure anything but that note of—it was almost motherliness—in his voice. She could never explain or understand the feeling of panic terror that it brought to her. She sat up quivering, and smiled at him with dark, dilated eyes.

"I'm all right," she said breathlessly. "Quite all right."

With an effort she began to talk to him, discussing the evening, the guests, agreeing with him that Imogen was charming and Roddy a nice boy.

He smiled at her as he handed her out of the motor.

"You were half asleep when we left the Hall," he said, "and now you're as lively as a cricket."

"I don't think crickets *are* lively," she said. "I think that it's quite a mistaken idea. They're really most unhappy creatures. They want to be plaintive like nightingales, but their voices are pitched too high and so everyone thinks that they're happy."

She hardly heard the nonsense she was talking.

§

When she lay in bed in the darkness, her passion took possession of her again, like something springing from ambush to destroy her the minute she was alone and unprotected. Humphrey lay beside her, heavily asleep. She slipped out of bed, and dressed with the quick, lithe, furtive movements of a wild creature. Then she went silently from the room, down the broad carved staircase to the dining-room, undid the window catch and dropped lightly out into the garden. It was raining, but she hardly noticed it. She hadn't gone out like this at night since she knew of her gipsy blood—till now. Now she went swiftly up on to the downs, and there walked as she had walked in her childhood through the wind and rain, not driven as then by a feeling of kinship with the elements, but driven by the torrent of her desire as a leaf is driven by the wind. She was a child no longer. Womanhood had come to her suddenly, tumultuously, sweeping her up like a tempest, stirring her passionate nature to its depth. It was a madness, a fever in her blood. Half walking, half running, she went on till her very physical weariness had stilled something of her torment. But when she had left the downs and reached the valley, it descended on her again. She hadn't intended to go to the Hall, but she found herself there, standing in the garden where she could see Roddy's window. The light went out as she watched. . . . She flung herself suddenly on the ground and lay there as if the earth would ease something of her torment.

Roddy gazed into the darkness, smiling faintly, his mind full of thoughts and visions of Moireen. . . . Imogen lay wakeful, thinking about Naomi, uneasy about her, she didn't know why. . . . She thought once that she heard a sound of sobbing, then told herself that it must be the wind.

It was the sound of her own sobbing that roused Naomi. She hadn't realised that she was weeping till she heard it. She rose to her feet, mechanically straightened her dress and set off stumblingly down the road.

§

And then—just as she was turning into the fields for the short cut that led to The Towers, she came face to face with a woman. In the dim light she could just see that she was tall and gaunt, with piercing eyes and weather-beaten face as brown as the earth. She couldn't see her hair because it was confined by a coloured handkerchief, but she judged her to be about sixty. Gold earrings swung by her brown wrinkled cheeks.

For a minute they stood confronting each other in silence. A curious excitement seized Naomi. Her breath came and went quickly.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Who are you?" said the woman.

She had a voice that made Naomi think of the wind blowing over the uplands, of water flowing through the valley. It was deep and rich and musical. Naomi answered unsteadily:

"I'm Naomi—Naomi Belson. I used to be Naomi Godstone. Do you know me?"

"You're my daughter's child. I've come here for news of you. I always come here for news of you when we're round these parts."

"Your daughter?" Naomi began to plead sobbingly, breathlessly, "Oh, take me to my mother. Let me come with you. I belong to you. I don't belong here. I want to go away. I can't bear it. It's breaking my heart."

The old woman shook her head.

"Your mother's dead. She died soon after you were born. And it's here you belong."

"Tell me about my mother. Quickly."

"It's not a long tale," said the woman slowly. "A man loved her. Not one of us. A gentleman. A poet he was, too, and famous. You used to see his pictures in the papers and read of him. He loved her and followed her. For a long time she held him off. She wasn't loose and she didn't want to mate out of her own folk. But one night he had his way with her and they mated. Under a hawthorn bush, it was, on the moors in the wind and the rain. He never saw her again. She went off the next morning, and covered her tracks so as he couldn't find her. She loved him, but she said that she'ld only come to be a burden to him if it went on. And when you came she was troubled, for she felt that you belonged to his folks and not to hers. She was sick and it dwelt on her mind, that you were his child and shouldn't belong to us. And then she met the gentleman that brought you up. A kind gentleman, he was. He met her on the hills as she was following the caravan with you in her arms, and he talked to her and looked at you and seemed to take kindly to you. He said that it grieved him deeply that he had no children. I think that he reminded her of her lover in his ways. She was a sick woman with a sick woman's fancies, and nothing could stop her but that she must come back and lay the child at his door in the early morning. . . . It was a week later that she died. But every year I've been round to see or hear that you were well. I heard when they brought you down South, and followed you here. You're married now?"

"Yes."

"Are you happy?"

"No."

"Women weren't made for happiness, I reckon. It comes to few enough. . . . I won't come round here again now you're married. I'm getting old. Perhaps I shan't see you again." She suddenly took Naomi's face in her two hands and looked down at it. "You're—like your mother."

"And my father? Who is he?"

"He died many years ago."

The woman bent forward quickly and kissed her. Then—it was as if the earth had opened to swallow her up. She had disappeared into the darkness.

§

Naomi went blindly back to her home. What she had been told had for the time being driven out even the thought of Roddy. Child of a gipsy and a poet, begotten on the moors in the wind and rain. . . .

She slipped into bed as the dawn was breaking. Her husband stirred faintly in his sleep. . . .

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XIX

MOIREEN's engagement to Roddy was announced at the end of the week. Naomi's pride had come to her rescue again, fashioning for her once more a mask to turn to the world. The dreaminess that had been peculiarly hers from childhood had completely vanished. She couldn't afford to be dreamy now, couldn't afford to wander over the countryside, to climb up on to the downs

and watch the light fade in the valley. If ever she relaxed her guard for an instant, the thought of Roddy was there waiting to enter her heart.

She threw herself into a host of duties at home and outside her home. People in the neighbourhood found her a willing worker. She was elected on to several committees, and it was always she who did the hundred and one unpleasant duties that someone on every committee has to do. They called her a " splendid worker." They said how much her marriage had " improved " her. They saw a handsome young matron, running her home competently, going from parish work in Deerford to social work in Lainsforth, and they approved. She felt uneasily that she was a hypocrite, but it was the only thing she could do. As long as all her faculties were absorbed in something—anything, it didn't matter what —she could get through the days. She dare not take her mind for a second from what she was doing—dare not face for a second the sharp ecstasy that was her love for Roddy, or the black despair that was her life without him.

Her meeting with the old woman who was her grandmother had steadied her. The memory of that brown, weather-beaten face, the majestic carriage of the stately form, the piercing eyes, unconquered, unconquerable, had taken away the sting of shame that had been in her heart ever since she heard Cousin Geraldine's "gipsy brat."

She tried to put her emotion aside, and reason out her situation with her mind alone. She'd made a contract with Humphrey and she must abide by it. Every marriage was a binding contract, but her marriage was more binding than most, because she'd entered into it in order to obtain something that she felt to be essential to her happiness. She'd done it with her eyes open. If she regretted it afterwards, if she found that what she'd wanted to obtain through it was not after all

essential, still—she couldn't go back on her contract. Marriage was like that. One's honour, one's pride, was at stake. . . .

A contract . . . that was the way to look at it. A contract . . . one's honour at stake. . . . And minute by minute one's life would slip by. The thing to do was to fill every minute so that one hadn't time to look back or forward. It was quite simple. . . .

And then, just when she'd persuaded herself that it was quite simple, the memory of Roddy's face would come to her, turning her blood to fire, making her philosophy, her cool reasoning about "contracts," vanish into air. . . . But that belonged to her inner life. Her outer life she had well under her control. With the self-discipline that her pride had taught her, she had learnt to give Humphrey automatically all that he wanted of a wife—the cheerful conversation, the smiles, the pretty frocks, the mechanical caresses. He was more of a stranger to her than he had been when first they had met. She felt that he had been nearer to her when they stood together in the garden of The Towers and he told her of his mother, than he was now. Humphrey's aunt . . . she was glad that she was a long way off, so that she couldn't watch and understand. Humphrey's aunt and the gaunt gipsy woman with the brown face and kindly, piercing eyes . . . they would have liked and understood each other.

§

She didn't tell Humphrey of Roddy's engagement till several days after she had heard of it. She shrank from telling him lest in doing so she should somehow betray herself. But she realised that the longer she refrained from telling him, the more difficult it would be. So she

mentioned it very casually one evening when they were in the music-room after dinner. She was sitting at the grand piano, and he was in an arm-chair by the window. She was only a mediocre performer, but he loved to hear her play. She hated the room because it was the room where she'd first met him, but she encouraged his preference for it because to sit here playing to him helped to make her feel that she was fulfilling her part of the contract to the utmost.

"By the way, did I tell you that Roddy and Moireen are engaged?"

She spoke with an effort, turning over the pages of her Beethoven as she spoke. Her heart had quickened, but to her relief her voice was light and casual.

He looked at her with interest.

"No. . . . When did you hear?"

"Oh, a few days ago. I thought I'd told you."

"No, you never mentioned it."

He sounded surprised. She summoned all her faculties to hide her confusion.

"Didn't I? I thought I had done. There's always so much of local news to tell you that I suppose I forgot."

She was overdoing it. Panic swooped down upon her. Surely he knew—everything now. But, filling his pipe, he only said casually: "Is Mrs. Godstone pleased?"

"I think so. I've not been there since I heard. I've been so busy."

She'd been a fool to have shirked going there. What must he think? She added hastily, "I'm going round there to-morrow."

And now her voice was getting out of control. But still he didn't seem to notice. He said:

"I don't know either of them well, of course, but they seem a nice couple. Give them my congratulations when you go."

§

She went to the Hall the next afternoon. It was Saturday, and Roddy, she knew, would be at home. She must meet him and Moireen and—get it over.

She arrived there early, walking unannounced through the French windows into the drawing-room. She wanted to defy it all, this room, Imogen, Roddy.

Imogen was alone. She looked up from her interminable needlework.

"Come in, my dear."

"Is Roddy at home? I want to congratulate him."

"Yes. He's upstairs in his room. I'm expecting Cousin Geraldine every minute. She's coming for the week-end. And Moireen will be here for tea. You'll stay, won't you?"

"I only came to congratulate Roddy."

"He's upstairs."

"I'll go to him."

There was a new constraint between them that had to do, somehow, with Roddy's engagement.

Naomi went slowly upstairs and knocked at the door.

"Come in."

Roddy was standing at the window. He wheeled round as she entered and his face lit up.

"Naomi!"

He came forward with hands outstretched.

"Roddy . . . congratulations. I—oh, I so want you to be happy."

He bent down and kissed her.

"Isn't it wonderful? But it couldn't be quite perfect till you'd said you were glad."

"I'm glad if you're going to be happy."

"Then you're glad. Because I am going to be happy."

She looked at the table on which stood a piece of half-modelled clay.

"Have you—shown them to her yet, Roddy?"

"No. I've been rather a coward. I've been so afraid that she'll say they're no good. She's the first person I've come across who—really knows about that sort of thing at all. We're such Philistines here, aren't we? It's so nice to cling on to the hope that she'll say they're —all right, and that I can chuck the factory. I'm a beastly coward, Namy. But I'm going to get it over to-day. She's coming up to see them to-day. Everything has been so—wonderful since we got engaged, that somehow I can't help feeling that it's going to be all right."

The happiness of his thin sensitive face tugged at her heart. He seemed so—defenceless. As if he were welcoming a treacherous enemy. His sullenness had been a kind of armour and he had laid it aside. His spirit was fine wrought. He could suffer so exquisitely. And Moireen with her gentle voice and pretty ways—oh, she could hurt. Naomi was sure of that. She could hurt damnably.

"Roddy," she said again, "are you sure that she—knows?"

"Dear, you heard her. She's in the set. She—belongs to that world. She knows it all."

His faith in this girl was unbearable.

"But, Roddy——"

He caught his breath and smiled tremulously.

"Listen," he said, "she's here." Footsteps and voices on the stairs. "Mother's bringing her up."

He flung open the door.

Moireen stood there with Imogen. Her burnished hair shone beneath a wide-brimmed hat. Her short upper lip was lifted in a smile. She looked the

incarnation of youth and loveliness. He took her slender figure in his arms and kissed her.

She came into the room and looked about her. Naomi, watching the three of them, had again a strong impression of some alliance between Imogen and Moireen, felt them in some way leagued together against Roddy. She heard again Imogen's gentle, weary voice : " His work at the factory is so terribly important. He'll do no good there as long as his whole interest is in those things upstairs."

The girl knew nothing, nothing, of Roddy's art, but she'ld pretend to and already she'd tacitly agreed with Imogen as to what she would say.

" It's the first time I've been here, you know," she said.

Roddy watched her with shining eyes as if Heaven itself had come into his room.

Imogen turned to Naomi.

" Cousin Geraldine's just come, dear. I wish you'ld go down to her. She's in the drawing-room."

They wanted Roddy alone and defenceless. They didn't want him to have any allies.

§

She went slowly downstairs to the drawing-room, her heart still beating unevenly, her red lips twisted into a bitter smile. Roddy's little room had once belonged to her, but she was being dismissed. It belonged to Moireen now. It had been sacred ground to her. It wouldn't be sacred ground to Moireen. . . .

Cousin Geraldine greeted her effusively.

" Darling, it seems ages since I saw you. . . . Do come and tell me all about yourself. . . . "

Hard, tinkling, effusive . . . but the note of secret intimacy had vanished. She'd offered Naomi her friendship and Naomi had refused it. Still, the effusiveness was there. She had never offered to pay Naomi the five pounds she'd borrowed and Naomi, catching the hard eyes fixed on her, suspected that another loan would be asked for that day. Naomi had her armour about her, armour that she had first borrowed from Cousin Geraldine herself. She was poised and assured. She talked trivially about trivial matters. And all the time her thoughts were upstairs with Roddy. She seemed to be holding him to her breast as she'd held him so often in his little-boyhood, protecting him from Moireen and Imogen as if they had been his enemies. She heard them coming downstairs and her heart leapt. They came in—Imogen and Moireen, followed by Roddy.

As Roddy entered, Naomi forgot again everything but her love for him. And she knew suddenly that if ever he came to love her, all her high-flown sentiments of honour and obligation would go to the wind. She knew it with mingled joy and terror. She was in the grip of something too strong for her.

She stood, watching him, her eyes soft and dark, her red lips parted, all her young body, as it seemed, aglow with love. It was Cousin Geraldine's eyes, fixed on her, that pulled her up sharp and brought her to herself. Cousin Geraldine's eyes, amused, understanding. . . . Naomi gathered her armour about her, but it was too late. Cousin Geraldine had seen. The blood flamed into Naomi's cheeks at the knowledge. Cousin Geraldine had seen . . .

Imogen and Moireen had joined Cousin Geraldine at the fireplace. Naomi went to the French window, where Roddy stood looking out over the garden. She could tell from his face what Moireen's verdict had

been. And he cared—cared more than he thought he'ld have cared.

"Well?" she said.

"It's no good," he replied shortly. "I knew at the bottom all the time that it was no good. I've been a fool."

"But, Roddy—you've enjoyed doing it. Why not keep on with it?"

"No. I've decided not to. She's right. If they're no good, I ought to be giving all my time to my real work. I wish I didn't hate the beastly factory so." He turned and looked across the room to Moireen, and the shadow fell from his face. "But it will be different when I've got her. Everything will be different when I've got her. I'm going to smash all my things to-night and forget them."

A sudden determination came to her.

"Promise me that you won't smash them till to-morrow night, Roddy."

He smiled.

"You funny kid! All right."

"And give me one."

He smiled again.

"Take any one you like."

She went home carrying one of Roddy's models wrapped carelessly in a piece of newspaper.

Cousin Geraldine, smiling hatefully as she said good-bye, murmured: "A souvenir?"

Naomi met her eyes squarely.

"Yes, a souvenir."

"I WANT to go up to town to-morrow, Humphrey," said Naomi that evening at dinner.

She sat on her husband's right hand at the large table in the crimson-hung dining-room.

She disliked this room more than any of the other rooms of The Towers except the music-room. Humphrey, on the other hand, liked it. It gave him a thrill of pride every time he entered it. The spaciousness and ceremonious grandeur of it seemed, despite his essential simplicity, to satisfy some deep need of his nature.

"Are the trains all right?" was all he said.

"Yes. If I go up directly after breakfast I think I can manage it."

He said nothing, yet some explanation, she felt, was due to him.

She had meant to make vague references to shopping, but now that she was face to face with him her instinctive honesty conquered.

"It's about—Roddy," she said with an effort. "He's been—modelling things for a long time, and Moireen says they're no good. She's stayed with the Lombards and so Roddy thinks she knows all about it. He's going to give it all up because of that. And—I don't think she does know. I want to take one of his things up to Mr. Lombard myself and see what he thinks about it. If it *is* no good, of course, there's no harm done."

He nodded with slow approbation. "I see. That's a good idea."

She felt grateful to him for not taking the ordinary conventional view, for not saying: "Isn't it rather a funny thing to do? Hadn't you better take what Moireen says as final?"

When they were up in the music-room, he said suddenly: "Roddy's quite satisfied with what she said, I suppose?"

"Yes. At least he believes it. It's—a blow to him. He's always hated the factory. . . ."

Then suddenly it all came out—all about Roddy's secret love of his art, his hatred of the factory, his father's story and Imogen's fears. She'd never told Humphrey about it before. It was bliss to talk about Roddy even to Humphrey, bliss to say his name . . . Roddy . . . Roddy. . . .

"Imogen's so sure that his things are no good and she's so afraid of his giving up his work at the factory. I think that she's talked it over with Moireen, and made Moireen see as she sees. And I don't think that Moireen really knows much about it. I don't know anything about it either, but I'm sure that Roddy's an artist."

"You're looking tired out again," said Humphrey suddenly. "I think you do too much. You're always on the go. You ought to rest more."

She felt a sudden panic. Had she betrayed herself? She called her gay, light self-possession to her, and said:

"Oh, Humphrey, don't turn into the sort of man who thinks that a woman ought to lie down on a sofa every five minutes."

He smiled slowly.

"All the same, you look over-tired, and you've looked over-tired these last few days."

She rose.

"I'd better go to bed, then, so as to be fresh for to-morrow, hadn't I?"

She left him standing by the window where first she had seen him, looking down at the dusk-shrouded garden.

§

Her heart didn't begin to fail her till she reached the large front door in Chelsea, and then for the first time she realised how strange her visit would seem to this man whom she had never met, who had never heard of her. And yet, to feel that she was doing something, anything, for Roddy, quieted the aching unrest of her heart.

She rang the bell and stood there waiting, her heart pounding against her side. She had felt too much agitation to think of clothes, and had automatically put on the old felt hat and tweed costume that she wore at home in the garden or the village. She carried Roddy's model under her arm.

A butler admitted her to a long, rather narrow hall. She had a fleeting impression of Persian rugs, dark oak and flowers.

"He doesn't know my name and he isn't expecting me," she said as she handed her card. She had written "Urgent" across one corner.

The butler looked at her rather dubiously. "I'll just go and see——"

He disappeared through a dull red portière to reappear a few minutes later with a "Step this way, please."

He showed her into a studio built out over the garden. It was plain and workmanlike. There was a half-modelled piece of clay on a table at the window, and by it stood a man, tall and thin, with a pointed beard and keen eyes, who turned to her as she entered. For a moment he looked in silence at this glowing, self-possessed young woman with her vivid beauty and countrified tweeds.

"Your card said 'Urgent,'" he said, "so I had

you shown straight in here. Can I help you in any way ? "

He had moved a tall-backed carved chair forward as he spoke. She sat down, feeling grateful for his abrupt opening of the interview. She began as abruptly on her side, omitting the conventional apology for interrupting him.

" Yes. I want your help badly. You—know Moireen Silver, don't you ? "

He frowned uncertainly.

" Moireen—— ? "

" Moireen Silver. She stayed here."

He considered the name thoughtfully, then shook his head.

" I don't remember the name. She would be one of my daughters' friends, of course. What was she like ? "

" Very pretty. Golden hair and blue eyes. A pretty voice."

" Oh, yes." He was still frowning reflectively, one foot upon a low stool, his elbow resting on his knee. " I think I remember vaguely. But my daughters keep the house full of their friends. I only meet them at meals."

" She was very much interested in sculpture."

He smiled rather bitterly.

" I don't think so. My daughters' friends are not interested in sculpture. They're interested in dances and dresses and matinées and many other things, but they're not interested in sculpture."

" She wasn't in here much, then ? " said Naomi.

" She's never been in here. They don't."

Naomi was silent. She saw Moireen in this house—living for the pleasure and excitement of the moment—dances, dresses, matinées, parties—and yet keeping her

ears open for any technical terms, for any expert opinions she might pick up (at meals, probably, when other artists were there) that would be useful social coinage afterwards. For, of course, she had her bread to earn. She had to be able to talk to anyone about anything. Neat little technical terms, and the phrases that had tripped so glibly off her tongue and that had so nearly spoilt Roddy's life.

" She's just got engaged to my—to a friend of mine who's been modelling in clay for some time. He—didn't know whether the things he did were any good. He's never been taught. But he believes what she says because—he's somehow got the impression that because she stayed here she's an expert on that sort of thing. She says that his work is no good, and so he's going to give it up. He works in his uncle's factory. He's going to be a partner."

He nodded quietly.

" I see. And "—he glanced at her parcel—" you've brought me something of his, to see what I think of it ? "

" Yes."

She undid the wrappings and took out the piece of clay.

He carried it over to the table by the window, put it down there and considered it, his foot again on the rung of the stool, his elbow on his knee, his fingers stroking his beard. It was rough and unfinished. It suggested almost a piece of clay that had accidentally taken a likeness to a human face, and yet there was about it a curious power and forcefulness.

He looked at it for a few moments in silence, then turned his keen eyes to Naomi.

" Yes," he said, " there's something—fine about it. I'ld like to see some more of his things."

The sudden relief sent tears to her eyes and made her voice unsteady.

"Then you'ld advise him to—keep on with it?"

"Oh, yes. You say he's quite untrained?"

"Yes."

"Better in some ways of course, but—he needs training."

He glanced at her curiously, wondering what part she played in the little drama. Her gipsy beauty with its hint of wildness had of late deepened and matured. He looked at the dark liquid eyes, the red lips, and the seductive curves of the lithe young form.

"What would you advise him to do?" she was saying.

Her self-possession amused him. She looked so young, so vital, so sure of herself. . . .

"He ought to come to London," he said, then after a moment's thought added suddenly, "Look here, I'll take him on, train him and let him help me here, if his other work is like this. I must see his other work, of course, before I make any definite offer."

"His other work is like this," she said with quiet confidence, and added with a sudden childish naïvety that touched him, "I didn't know whether they were any good or not, but I always believed in him."

"He's an old friend of yours?"

"I was brought up with him," she said with the first trace of self-consciousness that she had yet shown, then, recovering the poise that sat rather oddly on her obvious youth, she said, "What may I tell him when I go back?"

He hesitated a minute, then said: "Yes. Why not? Tell him that I'll come down and see his things and talk it over with him."

He began to pace up and down the room, his hands behind him. "It's the old way—and the best way. The pupil in the master's workshop. And he's got it. It's there. We can meet as fellow-craftsmen."

She rose. He watched her narrowly. A child playing at being grown up, putting on this arrogance of seductive beauty, as if it had been a trailing scarf or a picture-hat to parade in for a charade. . . . Then her eyes met his, and he saw suddenly that this was no child, for all her youth and inexperience, but a woman who had suffered deeply.

"Thank you," she said simply. "It will save his life."

He smiled.

"That's rather an exaggeration, I'm afraid."

Her dignity dropped from her, and she spoke with a sudden passion of intensity.

"It isn't. It will save his life. Literally."

He looked at her card again. "Mrs. Belson." He felt a sudden irrelevant curiosity as to what her husband was like.

"And you came all this way to see me?" he said.

"It was nothing. I'ld have come much farther. You're sending me back with such a light heart that I think I shall fly home."

She was a child again, eager, grateful, happy.

"No, don't fly. I don't approve of it."

"I won't, then. Besides, I've got my return ticket in my purse."

He showed her out himself, and went back slowly to his studio.

§

Naomi walked from the station to the Hall, and opened the front door herself. She had had a long, exhausting day, but she felt as fresh and eager as if she had just awakened.

From the half-open drawing-room door came Cousin

Geraldine's voice. "I remember so well the first person we saw without a bustle. It looked quite indecent. We all said, 'Doesn't she look a sight?' And I remember when black stockings came in, and I was terribly upset because I was the last little girl in the dancing-class left wearing white ones, but I got my own back soon because I was the first one to wear button boots. All the others still had elastic-sided ones."

Naomi opened the door and stood on the threshold. Imogen, Geraldine and Roddy were sitting round the fire, Moireen in a pale yellow evening dress on a footstool at Imogen's feet. They looked at her in surprise. Naomi saw none of them but Roddy.

She went forward to him.

"Roddy," she said, "it's all right. I've taken your thing up to Mr. Lombard. He's going to come down and see you. He says you must keep on with it. He wants you to work with him."

Roddy had grown pale and his eyes were shining. He looked like a man who glimpses Paradise.

"Naomi, is it true? Oh, it can't be true." His voice broke, then he went on, "Naomi, you brick, you angel to do this for me!"

Moireen joined in their excited chorus.

"His pupil! Roddy, you'll be *made*. We'll live in London near them. Oh, *Roddy*, isn't it marvellous!"

She had forgotten that only a minute ago she had mentally arranged quite a different future for them to the last detail . . . Roddy, a partner in the factory; she, a leading figure in the social life of Lainsforth. . . . She had altered the whole scene now . . . Roddy, a fashionable sculptor . . . London . . . parties . . . money. She felt no compunction at having given a wrong verdict. She lived so completely in each moment as it came that she'd already forgotten ever having given it.

"We'll have a house in Chelsea. . . . Oh, Roddy, won't it be *fun* living in London!"

She bombarded Naomi with questions. Imogen said nothing, but there was a smile on her lips, a dreamy radiance in her eyes.

For herself, of course, the future would be less bright than if Roddy had stayed at the factory, but the first feeling she had been conscious of when she heard Naomi's news had been a rush of pride and joy, not in Roddy, but in Michael, her husband. Roddy's genius seemed somehow to justify Michael's frustrated life, as if those daubs that Michael had executed with such joy and labour had gone to the making of Roddy's genius, as if Roddy were taking up some work where Michael had laid it down. ("Forgive me for not believing, Michael. I didn't know. I didn't understand.")

Cousin Geraldine, too, took no part in the eager questioning. She was gazing with horror-filled eyes at Naomi's old felt hat and shapeless tweed costume. At last she said faintly:

"My dear . . . you've surely not been up to town like that!"

MR. LOMBARD saw Roddy's other work and his opinion was confirmed. The two men, moreover, took to each other at once and an agreement was quickly reached. Roddy was to work with Lombard in his studio for a definite salary. It was a generous arrangement, for Roddy was to be his pupil as well as his assistant. He and Moireen were to be married in the spring. Moireen

had set her heart on a certain picturesque little house in Chelsea, and Uncle Frederick with unexpected generosity had bought the lease of it as his wedding present to them. Roddy was like a man reborn, like a prisoner restored suddenly to air and light, like a lover, long separated from his love, restored to her at last. His face had lost its habitual lines of sullenness. Fresh youth, fresh life seemed to have come to him. Of his love for Moireen there could be no doubt, but it was to Naomi he still turned for advice and sympathy. It was like a refrain through the weeks before the wedding :

" I'll ask Naomi about it. We'll see what Naomi thinks."

Moireen seemed to share his admiration for Naomi, seemed to be ready with him to defer everything to her, without a trace of jealousy. All was serene, like a calm sea under a blue sky. . . .

Naomi was so busy during the weeks before their wedding, making curtains for their Chelsea house, helping with their choice of household linen, drawing out lists, measuring, scheming, planning with them, that she had no time to look backward or forward. And Roddy was there, eager, boyish, bursting into the room where she sat working :

" Namy, we've found an adorable little French bureau." " Isn't this a heavenly bit of Spode ? " " I say, Moireen's got a gorgeous Persian rug from the Marlows." " Namy, just look at this."

The weeks before his marriage passed in a sort of dream.

Then—the wedding was over and she was left alone with Humphrey.

She turned back to her work in house and garden and village, but found with a sort of bewildered panic that it had lost its power to give her forgetfulness.

The scenes where she had known Roddy were so full of memories that it was a daily, hourly torment to her to move about in them. She suggested to Humphrey that they should go away for a holiday, and they went to Torquay. Humphrey enjoyed it, but Naomi was desperately unhappy. The longing for the scenes where she had known Roddy became now almost more than she could bear. They had meant to stay away a month, but Humphrey thought that the sea air was not suiting her, and brought her back at the end of a fortnight.

Though she had been unhappy, the change had done her good, and on her return she threw herself determinedly again into the life she had been building up for herself before Roddy's engagement. People were glad to have her back. They found her capable and generous and hospitable—rather abrupt sometimes and with little patience for incompetence of any sort, but, of course, she was " somebody " now, and they were willing to overlook an occasional curtness of manner. The Towers was beginning to take its place among the big houses of the neighbourhood. People had grown accustomed to it and had ceased to look upon it as a joke.

Humphrey was proud of her and of the work she did in the neighbourhood, but she had need of all the self-control that her lonely childhood had taught her. Her husband's slowness of speech and thought were beginning to get intolerably on her nerves. He was as clumsy and ponderous in mind as he was in body. When in a good humour, he made elephantine jokes that were literally torture to her. And yet his kindness and simplicity still had power to disarm her. She could feel her nerves so jarred and jangled by his slow heavy voice that she could have screamed aloud, and yet she couldn't

dislike him, and she still clung to her determination to fulfil her part of their contract.

§

Vivienne wrote long letters to her at irregular intervals. The Blue Birds were succeeding beyond their highest expectations. It had suddenly become the fashionable " show " to see and talk about in Manchester. Vivienne was taking a much more important part in it than she had taken at first.

" I love it," she wrote to Naomi, " and I love everyone in it and everyone who comes to see it. It's too thrilling for words. We keep altering the programme, bringing it up to date and putting in topical references. People come over and over again. It's the greatest fun. Much more fun than teaching the young idea would have been."

Vivienne had written one or two of their sketches and was at work upon a third. She was radiantly happy. Naomi, reading her letters, could see the keen vivid humorous little face, the grey-green eyes sparkling, the thin red lips with their faint mocking smile. She read eulogies of the " show " in the papers. Vivienne was particularly referred to as a " promising young comedienne." Once or twice Naomi thought of asking Humphrey to take her up to Manchester for a week-end so that they could go to it. But there was a faint jealousy nagging at her heart, and she shrank from watching Vivienne's triumph till she had conquered it. She could not help comparing their lots. It seemed as if Vivienne had escaped into a fuller, larger world, while she had only a lifetime of imprisonment and frustration to look forward to.

Vivienne was too busy to come home for visits, and it

never occurred to the Vicar and his wife that it was possible for them to go up to Manchester to see her.

Mrs. Darrent was proud of her, but rather bewildered. It was so very different from the career she'd always imagined for her. She'd seen her in imagination a mistress on the staff of one of the big public schools (she'd hoped for Cheltenham), and this—Vivienne on a stage in an abbreviated pierrette's skirt doing comic turns—was so very different. She was ashamed, however, of her secret dismay, and tried to hide it from both her husband and Vivienne.

§

It was early in the next year that Naomi received the invitation from Moireen to stay with her and Roddy at Chelsea. She did not tell Humphrey of the invitation till the day after she'd received it. He had arrived home rather early from work, and had come to her in the little room that had been Aunt Rachel's and that she had now furnished and used as a sitting-room. It was an unconscious protest against the rest of the house—sombre colourings, a few good antiques, a Persian rug on the dark floor. It had lost the cheerful farmhouse kitchen look that it had had in Aunt Rachel's time, but it still suggested a lonely outpost in an enemy's country. She always felt nearer to Roddy in this little room than anywhere else in the house.

Humphrey was rather puzzled by it, and his bewilderment, when first he saw it, had pricked her conscience, and made her feel as if in some way she were going back on her bargain.

"Seems to me a bit dark," he said, looking round it. "Don't you find it depressing?"

"No," she said, and added casually, "I like it for a change."

He said nothing more, but the next day she saw him looking thoughtfully round the ornate drawing-room.

"Well," he said at last, "this is what I call a nice bright cheerful room."

"Of course it is," she said quickly.

"You like it?" he persisted.

"Of course I do."

He seemed relieved.

"That's all right," he said. "I thought of you, you know, all the time that I was furnishing it. It seemed to me to—express you somehow."

She had smiled crookedly, as a mother might smile when presented by her child with a distorted caricature as his first "portrait" of her.

She spent all her time in the little room when Humphrey was away, but in the evenings, when he was at home, they sat in the drawing-room or the music-room. He was a man who gave scant thought to anything that did not actually come before his eyes, and, because he so seldom saw her in it, he believed that she had entirely given up her use of the room.

This evening, however, she asked him to come into it for coffee.

"We can go to the music-room afterwards," she said lightly.

Her heart was beating unevenly. Moireen's letter of invitation lay still unanswered on the little bureau. She still hadn't made up her mind whether to accept it or not. Or rather she had made up her mind a hundred times to refuse it, only to decide immediately afterwards to accept it. Whatever happened she *must* see Roddy . . . whatever happened she *mustn't* see Roddy. And then suddenly she decided to leave it to Humphrey.

He should decide. If he wanted her to go, she'ld go, and, if he didn't want her to go, she wouldn't. He couldn't know, of course, how momentous the decision was, but he should make it.

§

After that she felt almost at peace again, as if the issue had been taken out of her hands.

But as soon as she and Humphrey were in the little room and the butler had brought the coffee and left them alone, her heart quickened and that vague terror that had been about her ever since she had received Moireen's letter clutched her by the throat. The air of the little room seemed suddenly to be tense with battle. She and Humphrey were not alone. Roddy was there and Aunt Rachel was there. Roddy and she ranged against Humphrey and Aunt Rachel. Humphrey leant back in his chair and drank his coffee with the sleepy content of a hard-working man at the end of his day's work. Finally he said with slow heavy deliberation :

" You look nice in that dress, lass. It's new, isn't it ? "

She had schooled herself not to betray her exasperation, but to-night her nerves were on edge, and it was with a conscious effort that she kept the irritation out of her voice as she replied :

" No. I've had it all this year. I've worn it nearly every night this week."

He smiled and she smiled back, trying to smile naturally.

" You always look so gradely," he said, " that one doesn't notice what you're wearing."

" Humphrey, I've heard from Moireen to-day. She wants me to go and stay with them in Chelsea."

Her voice wasn't quite natural, but he noticed nothing

unusual in it. He looked vaguely interested in her news.

"You're going, I suppose?" he said.

She was silent for a moment, then said as if with an effort:

"No . . . I don't think I will."

He glanced up at her in surprise.

"Why not?"

She said wildly the first thing that came into her mind.

"I don't want to leave you."

He was touched.

"It'll be only for a week or two?" he said.

"Yes, but——"

"I shall be all right. I think you ought to go."

She said nothing, and, looking at her again, he noticed her pallor for the first time.

"You're not looking well again," he said. "It would do you good to go away."

She clutched at another excuse more unconvincing even than the first.

"It's such a nuisance going away," she said.

"Oh, but you oughtn't to get like that," he said. "You're too young to begin to get like that. I ought to have taken you out more. . . ." The thought evidently worried him. "It'll do you all the good in the world to go. Besides, Roddy's always been such a pal of yours. I think he'ld be hurt if you didn't go. I've never had a sister myself, but I can understand that a sister means a lot to a man."

"I'm not Roddy's sister."

He waved the objection away with a faint smile.

"No, but it's exactly the same as if you were. You've grown up as brother and sister. He's very fond of you. I think you ought to go. I think that Mrs. Godstone

would be rather hurt, too, if you didn't. After all, you haven't any real reason for not going."

"Haven't I?"

"Well, have you?"

"Do you want me to go?"

"Yes. I think you ought to go. I shall be quite all right here."

"Very well. I'll go. I'll write to Moireen first thing to-morrow."

The battle was over. Roddy and Aunt Rachel faded away. She'd won without fighting. She'd even fought on the other side. Won—or had she lost?

He was looking at her more closely.

"No, you don't look fit. You need a change."

"Well, I'm going to have one. I've said I'll write to Moireen and accept. Shall we go up to the music-room now?"

§

In the music-room he lit a pipe, and sat down at the pianola.

"Do you feel strong enough to bear it?" he said. "Scream out if you find you can't."

He never sat down to play without saying something like that. It was one of those often-repeated tricks of speech in him that played on her nerves like the torture of dropping water.

As a matter of fact, he showed an unexpected sensitiveness and delicacy in his manipulation of the instrument. He was passionately fond of pianoforte music, and liked to have the same pieces on gramophone records as he had on his pianola rolls. He would listen to it on the gramophone record then play it on the pianola over and over again, till the repetition drove Naomi nearly frantic.

She watched him now as he sat playing the instrument laboriously, absorbed in the work, his pipe between his teeth, massive, rough-hewn, clumsy, ungraceful. There was, she knew, something fine about him. He was slow and imperceptive, but he was quick enough always to shield and comfort her if he imagined her to be unhappy or tired. He was as blundering as a child but as kindly as a woman. There was in him a bed-rock goodness that she was aware of even when he exasperated her most. And, though she knew all this, knew his kindness, his unselfishness, his goodness, they left her unmoved. They stirred no chord of love in her. She'd wished, honestly wished, to love him, and she hadn't been able to. He was a stranger to her. It was as if he were someone she'd seen in a play, or read of in a book. He meant nothing. His childishness could stir her motherliness, his protective tenderness could stir in her that curious emotion, half shrinking, half terror, that she didn't understand, but—he was a stranger to her.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXII

THE house at Chelsea was small and austerely furnished—cream walls, dark stained wood, dark oak furniture with gaily coloured curtains and cushions and divans.

There was a toy dining-room with an oval mahogany dining-table that had been Imogen's present, and some Bristol glass on the mantelpiece that Mrs. Masterson had given them. Then there was a little drawing-room, with a brick fireplace and bright floor cushions on the dark wood floor. From that opened the studio, a long

high room with a skylight, a work-table, an oak settee, and barbaric hangings against the cream walls. At one end was a large open fireplace with a log fire burning in it.

Moireen looked happy and sparkling, dressed as ever in the newest fashion, the newest material, the newest colour. She shone and darted like a piece of quicksilver.

" Oh, Naomi, how lovely to see you! How sweet of you to come! I've been looking forward so *terribly* to seeing you."

The eager affectionateness of her voice touched Naomi. She had expected to be the country cousin whom Moireen had asked against her will because she was Roddy's foster-sister, and here Moireen was throwing her arms about her neck and clinging to her.

" Oh, darling, I've been so *longing* to see you. Darling, you must be my sister too as well as Roddy's. I've never had a sister and I've always *longed* for one. Roddy's at Mr. Lombard's now. He won't be back till after tea. Do you like your room? I can hardly believe that you're really here, darling."

It was a delightful little bedroom, with a sloping ceiling and dark beams, a little four-poster bed with an orange frill, bright splashes of orange in window-curtains and eiderdown, a small antique chest of drawers with a mirror on the top, and a bright blue Chinese rug on the dark wood floor.

" It's charming," said Naomi slowly.

" Of course you've got a *lovely* house," said Moireen; " it must seem just nothing to you."

The Towers. . . . So eager and affectionate had she been that Naomi had forgotten the insincerity that had always repelled her. But she glimpsed it again suddenly in that " lovely house," for she had often enough heard Moireen laughing at The Towers. She was glad to

glimpse the insincerity again. It helped her to harden her heart.

§

Downstairs a fire burnt in the lounge, and a little maid wearing a wisp of a muslin apron over a smart wine-coloured alpaca dress was setting a tray on a low tea-table by the fire. Almost at once the Lombard girls were announced. Moireen flew to welcome them, and they chattered animatedly, discussing recent parties and shopping expeditions, arranging others for the future.

They were girls of Moireen's type, pretty, charming, vivacious, pleasure-loving. Naomi remembered the look on their father's face when he had said:

"My daughters' friends are not interested in sculpture. They're interested in dances and dresses and matinées and many other things, but they're not interested in sculpture."

None of them mentioned Roddy or his work. Other people were announced, young people, girls like Moireen and the Lombards, young men of the consciously artistic or the man-about-town type. Moireen was the centre of it all. She introduced Naomi to her guests, but Naomi unostentatiously withdrew to the outskirts of the group to watch. It was Moireen she wanted to watch, the new Moireen who was Roddy's wife. And as she watched, knowledge came in a sudden flash of illumination.

Moireen wasn't a bewildered child, as once she'd thought her, and she wasn't an adventuress. She was a flower that turns to the sun. Light, warmth, movement . . . she had to have them. She lived with every atom of her being in the passing moment. There was no conscious deceit, no conscious hypocrisy or insincerity about her. Change, and novelty, and people about her,

made her happy, and for the moment she honestly loved those who gave it to her. Her affection would not outlast the moment, would leave no memory, would certainly make no sacrifices, and yet—affection of a shadowy sort it was. For all her charm and loveliness she wasn't real. She was like a piece of thistledown, like a thread of gossamer floating in the air in the dawn of a summer morning. And this was Roddy's wife.

They were all going through the folding doors into the studio now, laughing, talking, chaffing each other as they went.

"We're going to dance, darling," called Moireen. "Won't you come?"

Naomi shook her head. "I'm tired," she said. "I'll watch you from here."

Someone turned on the gramophone. They were practising a new dance with much laughter, not quite sure of it, teaching each other.

Several of the men threw glances of interest at Naomi as they passed the open folding doors. There was about her beauty a sex provocation of which she was quite unconscious.

A man with a young face, grey hair, and Byronic necktie, who was dancing with Moireen, said:

"Moireen darling, I do love your sister-in-law. One talks so lightly about beautiful girls, but she *is* beautiful. She looks like Rachel mourning for her children or Ruth amid the alien corn. She's the type who'ld go to the Devil for a man or for whom a man would go to the Devil. It's a rarer type than you'ld think. I'ld go to the Devil for her now, this second, if it would give me half a chance with her. Don't tell her I've fallen in love with her, but do ask her to come and dance."

And Moireen, laughing and sparkling, drifted back

into the lounge, followed by her satellites, like the thistledown blown by the wind, doing what they wanted her to do, saying what they wanted her to say, feeling, while they were with her, just as they felt. She wasn't jealous because she was too shallow for jealousy. And, of course, there was no need for jealousy. Her own loveliness and sparkle held a court always around her.

"Naomi darling, *do* come and dance. Everyone wants you to. *Please* do."

Naomi followed her obediently into the studio. She was still watching her intently, still studying her, as if she were some problem that she had to solve. She'd changed since she'd married Roddy. She'd grown lighter, gayer, more irresponsible, as if she'd thrown overboard some ballast, relaxed some guard. Before she married Roddy, it had been necessary to be able to please and interest everyone. She'd had to keep in with things, be able to talk about them, have the jargon of the moment at her fingers' ends. She needn't do that now. She was married, settled. She needn't please everyone. She need only please herself.

§

Mechanically Naomi danced with the man who had asked Moireen to fetch her. Mechanically she repulsed his advances. All the time she was on the alert for signs of Roddy's home coming. She talked automatically, hardly knowing what she said, her ears strained for the sound of his voice, her eyes turning continually to the door by which she knew he must come.

She saw few traces of his work in the studio where they were dancing. A clay model stood on a table in the corner, and she stopped with her partner to look at it. It was unmistakably Roddy's work—strange,

symbolic, with that curious effect of suggesting so much more than what it actually expressed—but the touch was firmer, stronger. He wasn't feeling his way any longer. He was sure of it.

"It's absolutely unique," her partner was saying. "No one in London is doing anything like it. It's—genius, of course. Look at this. Just a head. Motherhood. You wouldn't take it for anything else. Love, tenderness, compassion, amusement. She couldn't be looking down at anything but a child in her arms. Roddy doesn't need to show you the child. You see it as plainly as if it were there. And the economy, the restraint. . . . I think his work's wonderful. I tell everyone so."

And Moireen, who had come up to them, said with her bright childish eagerness:

"Yes, isn't it? He's *wonderful.* I'm so proud of him."

Naomi, however, wasn't surprised a few minutes later to hear her saying to someone else:

"No, I can't either. I can't see what *anyone* sees in them, but still people sometimes buy them, and that's all that matters to me."

Naomi's partner had taken her to the settle that stood beneath the long high window.

"Where are you?" he said curiously.

She looked at him in surprise.

"You aren't here, you know," he went on, smiling down at her. "You've snubbed me very effectively, and talked to me very intelligently, but you've done it all in your sleep, as if I were part of your dream. Perhaps I am part of your dream. You wouldn't know me if you met me when you were awake, would you?"

"What nonsense!" she said, smiling.

"Oh, no, it isn't." He was looking at her with narrowed eyes. "I'ld give rather a lot to see you awake."

She laughed carelessly.

"I *am* more than half asleep. I've had a long journey to-day and I hate trains."

Then came the opening of the door and the sound of Roddy's voice. Her heart seemed to stop beating as he entered. He looked tired and rather worn—but happy. His eyes went first of all to Moireen, and Naomi knew that he still loved her. Among the whirlwind of her emotions, her relief was as sharp as her anguish. The only thing in the world she couldn't bear was that Roddy should be unhappy. Someone had stopped the gramophone, and the dancers halted suddenly. Moireen fluttered across the room to Roddy and kissed him.

"Oh, *darling*!" she said. "Here you are! How *lovely*! Now let's see how you remember your last lesson. Start the gramophone again, someone. . . ."

"Has Naomi come?" he said.

Then he saw her and his face lit up. He came towards her, holding out his hands.

"Naomi, how *ripping* to see you again," he said, kissing her.

All her turmoil subsided, and a radiant serenity possessed her. Enough to be with him, to see him, hear him, touch him, to forget both past and future. The sight of him, the sound of his voice, filled the whole world.

'Dance with Naomi," said Moireen. "Come along, Jimmie."

But everyone discovered suddenly that they'd no idea it was so late, and they must fly.

The man with the Byronic necktie shook hands with Naomi, and gave her a rather sardonic smile.

"I'm glad I've seen you awake," he said.

She looked at him coldly and said, "You've rather a vivid imagination, haven't you?"

They went one by one, Moireen making arrangements to meet the Lombard girls the next morning for a shopping expedition.

§

When they'd gone, Moireen sat on a stool at Roddy's feet, and told him all her news of her day. She still sparkled, as it were with the lingering light of the afternoon's enjoyment. She hadn't seen Roddy since the morning, so that his presence had a short-lived novelty about it. And, of course, she had a spectator in Naomi. She couldn't help seeing the picture she made with Roddy through a spectator's eyes. She laughed and chatted and teased him.

"Doesn't he look well, Naomi?"

"He looks splendid," said Naomi steadily.

The serene happiness that his first appearance had brought to her had vanished, leaving her on the rack. She'd been a fool to come. She'ld go home to-morrow. She could easily make some excuse.

Moireen was saying, "Isn't it *lovely* to have Naomi here?"

Moireen always took other people's opinions and standards. She had none of her own. Roddy looked on Naomi as the perfect sister—kind, loyal, understanding, always to be relied on. "Good old Naomi." And so Moireen took the same view of her. "Good old Naomi."

By dinner-time Moireen's sparkle was dying. The excitement of Roddy's home-coming and of Naomi's arrival had faded. Without change and excitement, without the constant coming and going of people about her, she was like a drug fiend deprived of her drug. She grew restless, unhappy, as the empty evening stared her in the face.

" Darling, let's go out after dinner," she said.

Now that his excitement at his home-coming had died away, Roddy looked more tired, more worn, than Naomi had thought when first he entered.

" You and Naomi go," he said. " I have to be at Lombard's early to-morrow. I'm useless for work if I racket round half the night."

" All right," said Moireen. " Naomi and I will racket without you."

It was clear that she was accustomed to going out without him. They'd passed the stage at which he tried to join in her pleasures. He didn't like " racketing " and he didn't like her friends, though he loved her so much that it would never have occurred to him to try to separate her from them. A stiffening of the atmosphere when he came home, had told Naomi that these people weren't his sort, that he'd nothing in common with them.

" I'll ring some of them up," went on Moireen, her sparkle returning, her eyes brightening. " We'll go to a show and then to the Six Feathers. . . ."

" I'ld rather not, please," said Naomi. " I'm very tired after the journey."

" Oh, *do*, Naomi," pleaded Moireen ; " they want you. They said such nice things about you this afternoon."

" Honestly I'm too tired, Moireen. I don't want to go out."

" Very well, I'll leave you to gossip with Roddy, then."

She ran up to her bedroom, calling downstairs, " Get me a taxi, Roddy." Then she flitted downstairs again, as light as the thistledown she so much resembled, and stood, wrapped in a silver tissue cloak, smiling at them like a radiant child going out to a party.

" Good-bye, darlings."

She put her arms round Roddy's neck and kissed him,

then drew back laughing, thrilling to her power over him.

"*Darling* Roddy! Don't wait up for me."

"All right, but don't be late."

They stood at the open door to wave to her as she drove off.

§

They turned slowly back to the lounge. There Roddy drew a deep breath and held Naomi at arm's length, smiling down at her.

"Well, this is great, isn't it?" he said. "Just like old times. And you haven't altered a scrap. You must sit with me while I work, won't you, just as you used to? Or do you want to turn in at once?"

"Oh, no."

"I know you're frightfully tired and I don't want to be a selfish brute, but it's so great to have you again like this."

"Oh, no. I'ld love to."

"My workroom's upstairs," he said; then, after a moment's hesitation. "Moireen uses the studio for dancing so much that——" He stopped, as if afraid of disloyalty, and went on quickly. "All these so-called studios are really dance-rooms nowadays. I think that most people prefer a smaller and more private room to work in. My workroom's jolly. Come up and see it."

His voice wasn't quite natural. He'ld have liked the studio to work in, of course, but Moireen's "crowd" was always there. And his workroom wasn't "jolly." It was small and badly lighted. The table with the unfinished models stood just beneath the tiny window. It was quite different from his room at the Hall, and yet something about it brought that room back so vividly

that a lump came suddenly and unexpectedly into Naomi's throat. He pointed to a low stool and smiled.

"There you are, Namy. Sit there and pretend we're back at home again." She sat down, and he went over to his work-table, removing the cloth that covered a half-finished piece of work.

She had herself in hand again now.

"Roddy, tell me about your work. How is it going?"

Half sitting on the table, half leaning against it, he lit a cigarette.

"I'm very lucky," he said slowly. "It's going better than I've any right to expect. Lombard's been awfully decent to me. He's sold some of my stuff for me. People know that he believes in it and that helps. He got up an exhibition of it in Bond Street last month. I don't mean that it's making much money, because it isn't, but the people who matter are—encouraging. I'm hoping that it will begin to make money soon because——" He stopped, as if pulling himself up, and ended, "It's expensive, living in London."

What he meant, of course, was that it was expensive living with Moireen. Moireen with her dresses and silver tissue cloak and taxis and dances and theatres and restaurants. You'd only to look at her to know that money ran like water through her pretty manicured fingers.

"Moireen likes living in London, doesn't she?" she said casually.

His face softened as he said, "Yes," but at once he changed the subject and began to ask her about Deerford. He was afraid of talking about Moireen. He loved her, but some subconscious instinct warned him of the precariousness of his love. He didn't want to talk of her with anyone, because he didn't want to see her with anyone else's eyes. Without knowing it, he was afraid.

"And so Lily married Macaulay after all," he said laughing.

"Yes. She makes him a splendid wife. Mrs. Bruce died soon afterwards, you know, and Lily puts on his chest protector and goloshes and goes out flower-hunting with him, and is as proud of him as Mrs. Bruce used to be."

"And mother? Is she lonely? I'm sure you're an angel to her."

She smiled crookedly.

"I go to see her when I'm in Deerford, but she never minded being alone. I could never make up for you, anyway."

"Oh, rats! I want to ask her up here but I don't know that she'ld really enjoy it. She doesn't like the town, does she?"

It wasn't that, of course. He didn't want his mother to visit Moireen for the same reason that he didn't want Naomi to talk about her. He was afraid that somehow it might show him a Moireen he didn't want to see. The faint lines graven about his mouth spoke of a disappointment that he'd never faced, never acknowledged to himself. He didn't want to have to face it. . . .

He threw his cigarette-end into the grate.

"Now I'm going to wire in," he said.

"You sure you don't mind my being here?"

"I *want* you there. You're the thing that I've missed ever since I came to work here. You don't mind being a thing, do you? Just the feeling that you might be coming in even if you didn't."

"Doesn't Moireen come in?"

"Moireen's so much in demand that they hardly give the child time to breathe, and anyway she's a wife and you're a sister. The most perfect wife in the whole

world can't quite take a sister's place, you know. I've missed you terribly. I've longed for this visit of yours."

She turned away her face quickly so that he shouldn't see it. Then she turned back to him. He was absorbed in his work. Leaning back in the shadow of the fireplace, she studied his face closely, comparing it with the face of the boy she had known. Despite those faint new lines on it, it was on the whole happier. The brooding sullenness and discontent of the boy had gone. He suffered, as all artists must suffer, but his work brought him happiness. Moireen couldn't spoil that. She, Naomi, couldn't spoil that. It came before either of them. Her jealousy, if she were jealous, must be for his work, not Moireen. Lost in his work, his sensitive boyish face shone now with a sort of radiance. He was happier married to Moireen and with the work he loved, than he'ld have been, married to a better woman but still at the factory. It was his work that mattered, it was his work that came first.

Suddenly he began to talk, partly to her, partly to himself.

"Truth. There's nothing beyond it. It *is* art. Beauty? It depends what you mean by beauty. Truth is often ugly. If beauty is truth then ugliness is beauty. Perhaps it is. There's beauty in the ugliest truth, just because it's truth. . . ." He turned to her suddenly, and stood looking at her with narrowed eyes in silence for a minute. "Naomi, I must model your head. I hadn't realised—— Moireen said, 'Isn't she beautiful?' and I said that I'd never thought about it. You were just Naomi to me. But she's right. You *are* beautiful. Are you frightfully tired, because I'd love to begin now at once?"

"No, I'm not tired."

Already he was setting to work, his eyes intent upon the exquisite line of cheek and chin and throat. Her beauty meant nothing to him beyond that. . . .

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXIII

She didn't go home the next day, of course. When she considered it in the morning's light, the thought of leaving Roddy and returning to The Towers seemed impossible. Something of recklessness had crept into her love. She was Roddy's . . . waiting till Roddy knew, as he must know soon, that she was his.

Cousin Geraldine came to dinner during the week she was there. She tinkled gaily with Moireen but beneath the gay tinkling surface the cordiality had vanished. In the old days, of course, Moireen had been careful to propitiate Cousin Geraldine, because Cousin Geraldine might prove useful to her. But that wasn't necessary any longer. Moireen's circle laughed at Cousin Geraldine, and Moireen readily joined in the mockery. Cousin Geraldine had intended to be Moireen's godmother in the social life of London, but Moireen had found her own life and her own circle. Secretly Cousin Geraldine resented this, and resented still more Moireen's facile pretence of following her social leadership. They greeted each other effusively, but Naomi was quick to sense the secret antagonism between them. She gathered that Cousin Geraldine had long since ceased to visit the little house. She hadn't come now to see Moireen, of course; she'd come to see Naomi. Or rather, she'd come to see Naomi and Roddy. Whenever Naomi thought of Cousin Geraldine, she remembered, with a quickening of her heart, that look she had once caught on

Cousin Geraldine's face. And now Cousin Geraldine had come to watch her, to—make sure.

She felt the mocking cynical gaze upon her all through dinner. Moireen was chattering gaily as usual. Roddy was in good humour, teasing her and laughing at her as if she were a child. Cousin Geraldine joined in with her mechanical tinkling. But this was all on the surface. Beneath was a struggle between Naomi and Cousin Geraldine, Cousin Geraldine trying to surprise her secret again, Naomi trying to hold it back.

"I know how you must have been looking forward to this visit, darling, because I *know* what Roddy is to you."

Naomi was at a disadvantage. She couldn't believe that her every look and movement didn't betray her love for Roddy to anyone who cared to look for it. All she could do was to stare defiantly into Cousin Geraldine's smiling face.

They had coffee by the fire in the little lounge.

"It's been so splendid having Naomi here," said Roddy again. "I don't know how we shall let her go back."

"Don't let her go back. Keep her," said Cousin Geraldine with her hard dry tinkle.

"I'm afraid Humphrey would have something to say," laughed Roddy.

"You must agree to share her. Lots of people live half in London and half in the country. Season tickets are quite cheap."

Naomi rose with a gesture of uncontrollable exasperation. Roddy rose too.

"Ready for another sitting?" he said to Naomi and, turning to Cousin Geraldine, "I shan't let her go back till I've finished her head anyway. She's got a wonderful head."

"She's got a wonderful heart too, Roddy," laughed Cousin Geraldine.

"Don't I know that?" said Roddy.

"Oh, we all *adore* Naomi," twitted Moireen mechanically, wondering when Cousin Geraldine was going and if there would be time to go out afterwards. What deadly relations Roddy had . . . Cousin Geraldine . . . Naomi.

The telephone bell rang and Moireen ran to answer it. It was the Lombard girls. They'd got some people there for dancing.

"Quite a jolly crowd, darling, so jump into a taxi and come along."

"I can't come *just* yet. I'll come as soon as I can if—I'd *love* to, but don't count on me——"

Cousin Geraldine rose.

"I must go, my dears."

Moireen flitted back.

"Oh, *must* you? Can't you stay the weeniest bit longer? Must you *really*? Oh, but if you *must*, I'll get a taxi and take you home on my way to the Lombards. Roddy and Naomi, you'll come, won't you? It's dancing and then they're going out for supper. No? . . . Aren't they a *stodgy* couple! Why did I marry them?"

"Because you needed something solid to hold on to, you little flibberty-jibbert," said Roddy. "I'm going on with Naomi's head. I'll go and get the workroom ready now."

He went up to the workroom, and Moireen went to get her cloak. Naomi stayed there in the lounge gazing into the fire. She'd forgotten Cousin Geraldine till Cousin Geraldine suddenly spoke in a level voice:

"Naomi, my dear, if ever you want to come up to town to meet Roddy quietly you could always meet him at my flat."

It was as if a hand of ice had closed round Naomi's heart. It would mean that, of course, the love that she had come to think of as a glorious offering to Roddy. It would mean lies, subterfuge, clandestine meetings, all the sordidness of an illicit love-affair. In the full rapture of love one didn't think of that side of it, but that was what it would mean. It would be like dragging something beautiful through the mud. It came to her in a flash of insight that often the quickest way to kill love must be to satisfy it. That smile on Cousin Geraldine's face, with its knowledge of a thousand unsavoury secrets, its cynical acceptance of the frailty of men and women, sent a wave of sickness through her body. She flung back her head and stared at her with smouldering eyes for a moment, then said in a hard dull voice :

" I don't want to meet Roddy—quietly."

Cousin Geraldine shrugged and laughed her dry tinkly laugh.

Moireen flew down, breathless and laughing, in the silver tissue cloak.

" A taxi, quick ! Come along, Cousin Geraldine. *Sure* you won't come, Roddy and Naomi ? Good-bye, darling. Good-bye, Naomi ! "

Roddy and Naomi were left alone again, as they had been on the night of Naomi's arrival. Roddy seized her by the hand and swung her to her feet.

" Come along and sit for me, lazy-bones."

Upstairs in the workroom she sat gazing in front of her, her dark eyes dilated, her red lips tense.

" Don't look so grim, Naomi. You didn't look like this yesterday. Relax. Relax." She smiled crookedly.

When he'd finished his work for the night, he wanted to talk to her.

" I love holding forth to you, Naomi. You're so nice to hold forth to."

She turned her face to him and said stonily :

" Roddy, I'm sorry. I'm too tired to talk or listen. I'm going to bed."

He rose and stretched.

" All right. I think I'll turn in myself. Good-night and happy dreams, Namy."

In her bedroom she undressed quickly and lay in bed staring into the darkness with frightened eyes. . . .

The next day she returned to Deerford.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXIV

Back at home, she threw herself once more into the life she had built up, escaping from it sometimes to tramp for miles over the downs, hardly knowing where she was going. She had looked to her visit to Roddy to clear things up, to show her where she stood, and it had left things where they were. Or almost where they were. It had shown her that she still loved Roddy passionately, unalterably. And—she realised with a stab of what might have been joy or terror—it had shown her that if she tried she could make Roddy want her, that there was something asleep in him that only she could waken. But with the knowledge, distorting it so that she dared not look at it, was the memory of Cousin Geraldine's smile. Back and forward, back and forward, swung the pendulum of her mind. Her nature was rich and passionate, but the blood of an austere spare-living race flowed in her veins, a race that had guarded the tie between man and wife as written laws could never guard it. She had taken Humphrey to be her husband. That was an accomplished fact that nothing could ever undo.

And Roddy had taken Moireen to be his wife. It could never now be as if those two did not exist, as though she had been Roddy's first love and he hers.

She had lost the sense of unity with nature that she had had in the old days. She didn't feel herself part of the earth, the grass, and the trees any more. She was only part of Roddy. She walked through the dazzling loveliness of spring on the downs as if she had been blind. The old heightened vision of beauty that had quickened her pulses and filled the world with glamour never came to her now. It was only the thought of Roddy that could do that now. . . .

§

She had need of every atom of her self-control. What she had dreaded most of all had happened. The exasperation that her husband caused her was slowly turning to hatred. Fight against it as she would, it advanced upon her slowly, relentlessly, as terrifying in its way as was her love for Roddy .

She was so intent upon hiding all traces of her exasperation from Humphrey, so intent on fulfilling meticulously the many duties she had taken upon herself, lest people should guess how little they meant to her (so a murderer might behave, she sometimes thought, trying to hide from those around him all traces of his guilt), that at first she was aware of nothing about Humphrey but that lumbering slowness of speech and movement that so exquisitely tortured her nerves.

It wasn't till she'd been at home for more than a week, that she began to notice a change in him. At first she thought that he was just as he'd always been, but that he seemed different to her because her love made everyone and everything seem different. Then she realised that he

was different. He was more silent than he'd been before. She caught him looking at her once or twice in a curious bewildered fashion. The embraces that she dreaded were less frequent. He never now called her " lass," or lapsed into broad Yorkshire. Yet she felt sure that the change was not connected in any way with her, that he had not the slightest suspicion of her love for Roddy, or the exasperation that he caused her. She puzzled over the change in him occasionally, but—it didn't seem really to matter. Nothing really mattered. . . .

§

She went to the Hall to tell Imogen about her visit to Roddy and Moireen.

Imogen, bending over her needlework, looked older, and more frail. There was a constraint in her manner as she asked Naomi about Roddy. Cousin Geraldine perhaps had been dropping hints, though Naomi gathered that Cousin Geraldine did not come to the Hall much nowadays.

" Roddy asked me to go to stay with them," said Imogen, " but I said that I'ld rather not just at present. I do so hate the town."

It wasn't that, of course. It was that she was afraid of finding that what Cousin Geraldine had said about Moireen was true. . . .

Naomi did what she could to dispel the cloud of anxiety that seemed to hang over Imogen. She enlarged upon the success of Roddy's work and his happiness with Moireen. " He looked awfully fit. His last message was his love to you, of course."

When she had said good-bye she turned in the doorway to look back at Imogen, already taking up her work again

(what anxious prayers for Roddy, thought Naomi, must be stitched into that piece of canvas). She looked faded somehow and weary, as all the room looked faded and weary, except that crude daub of a ship that hung over the mantelpiece.

She realised when she reached the road that this was the first time she had visited the Hall without feeling the faint resentment, the aching of her heart, that was the ghost of her old longing for Imogen's love.

§

It was the next week that she heard of Mrs. Darrent's illness. A casual acquaintance in Lainsforth told her.

"Nothing serious, you know. A slight congestion of the lung."

Naomi's conscience reproached her bitterly for having been so wrapped up in her own affairs that she had had no time or interest for those of her friends.

She went over to the Vicarage at once.

Mr. Darrent opened the door to her. He looked shabby and neglected, but he smiled that peculiarly sweet remote smile that she had connected with him from childhood.

"She's better. She's not allowed to talk, but I know she'll want to see you."

She entered and looked about her. It wasn't like the Vicarage. However shabby, the Vicarage had always been spotlessly clean and tidy, but now a film of dust lay over everything. On the hall chest stood a vase of flowers that Mrs. Darrent had put there before she was taken ill, and that no one had thought of removing. The flowers were dead, the water discoloured.

Through the half-open kitchen door, she caught sight

of a little maid who looked as dusty and uncared-for as the house and its master. The Vicar glanced about him as if seeing the place for the first time through a visitor's eyes.

"I'm afraid things are a bit neglected," he said. "The little girl does her best. She's quite untrained, you see. My wife was training her."

"What about your meals? Does she cook for you?"

"Oh—I manage," he said vaguely. A steady patience shone in his fleeting smile as he spoke. "Come up to see her, will you?"

She followed him up to the sickroom, where the gallant little woman lay on the big old-fashioned bed with its elaborate brass head-rails. The Vicar, so clumsy and absent-minded downstairs, seemed to move about the room and wait upon his wife with the deftness and gentleness of a woman, smoothing her pillow, holding a glass of water to her lips.

"He's such a wonderful nurse," whispered the invalid; "the village nurse comes in every day, but he's a much better nurse than she is."

She was as pleased as a child with the fruit and flowers that Naomi had brought for her. The Vicar took them downstairs to put into dishes. When he had gone, the brightness of Mrs. Darrent's smiles clouded over.

"You know, dear, she can't cook and I'm afraid he's getting nothing. The nurse sees to my meals and your mother's very good, but—he doesn't remember meals at all, you know, unless someone simply *makes* him come to them, and I've known him take a book into a meal and come away without eating a thing, quite believing that he's had it. . . ."

"Don't worry. I'll see that he has a good meal to-night, anyway."

"Everyone's so *wonderfully* kind," said Mrs. Darrent,

leaning back among her pillows with her happy childlike smile. "I'm really quite enjoying the rest, only—I'm worried about him. It's dreadful to think of no one looking after him."

Despite her inseparable radiant cheerfulness, however, she seemed worn and exhausted, and Naomi felt uneasy about her.

She sent a message to Humphrey that she would not be back till late, and set to work in the old-fashioned Vicarage kitchen, chivvying the little maid, sending her out for provisions and producing finally a well-cooked and appetising meal for the Vicar. She even had it with him, so as to be sure that he ate it. He was abstracted as ever, taking her presence as a matter of course, eating the food she gave him so absently that she was sure he had not the least idea at the end what he had eaten. When they had finished, she rose and said, "I'll just run up to see Mrs. Darrent again before I go."

He looked at her wistfully, the shadow of fear behind the serenity of his gaze.

"She's—getting on all right, I think, don't you? Fuller says there's nothing to be uneasy about."

"I'm sure there isn't," she said, but her heart was oddly heavy. She found the village nurse upstairs, settling Mrs. Darrent for the night. She was out of the room for the moment and Naomi went across to kiss the invalid.

"I'm *so* much better," said Mrs. Darrent. "I shall soon be downstairs."

"You oughtn't to talk. I've let you talk too much."

"I want to talk. Sit down by me for a minute, dear. Do you know, I've got such a longing to see my Peter again. I know it's impossible, of course, and I mustn't tell Timothy because it would worry him, but—it's just because I'm weak, I suppose. I think about him

such a lot. I keep seeing him as a little boy. He was such a dear little boy, wasn't he? You remember him, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"He wanted to marry you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"I should have been so glad, but you were right. You can't force love. You must marry where your heart leads you. And you married a good man, Naomi. It was like you, dear, to see beneath the things that other people laugh at, to know and love the goodness of him."

Naomi looked away from her out of the window, her lips set, her heart beating unevenly. She could not meet the serene unsuspecting eyes.

"I've dreamed about Peter every night since I was ill," the gentle voice went on. "I feel him so near me. The little boy Peter, I mean. He was so sweet and he loved me so. . . ."

"I know he did."

"And Vivienne. . . . I think of her as a little girl, too. She was such a darling, wasn't she? Do you remember her?"

"Yes. Wouldn't you like to have her with you now?"

"Oh, no. I mean, of course I would, but she's busy. We mustn't interfere with her work. She has her career, you know."

"Does she know you're ill?"

"No. I told her when it began and I thought it was a cold. I made Timothy promise not to tell her anything more."

The nurse returned, finished her ministrations, made up the fire, turned out the gas, lit the lamp upon the bedside table—where stood the old silver and ebony crucifix and the little pile of devotional books—and departed.

"I must go now," said Naomi. "I'll come round again first thing in the morning."

"How *kind* you all are."

The Vicar was just coming in as Naomi went out. He held in his hand a Bible and the shabby book of Family Prayers that Naomi remembered from her childhood. His eyes met his wife's in silence across the room, and it seemed to Naomi as if both the frail shabby figures were illuminated by a sudden blaze of light.

In the dark garden she stood for a minute looking up at the lighted window. The Vicar was there on his knees by his wife's bed. They would mention her by name in their prayers as they had always done, unknowing that she was cherishing this love for Roddy in her heart. She could see the two faces, worn and radiant, eyes closed, hands interlocked. She felt the sharp anguish of a soul shut out of Paradise, and her eyes swam suddenly with tears as she turned to go. . . .

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXV

VIVIENNE arrived two days later, summoned by a letter from Naomi. With her arrival the neighbourhood seemed to awake to the fact of Mrs. Darrent's illness. Flowers, fruit, jellies, dainties of every sort, poured in an unbroken stream into the Vicarage drive, through the yew tunnel and up to the front door. People seemed to realise suddenly the radiant personality that had been with them so long, remembered the childlike simplicity, the eager kindliness that they had always taken for granted. They stood in groups about the village discussing her illness.

" It turned to pneumonia, they say."

" So I hear. I do hope that she'll soon be about again. She's always been so cheerful."

" Yes. . . . Do you know, all the years I've known her I've never heard her say an unkind word about anyone."

Naomi spent most of her time at the Vicarage now. The old relationship with Vivienne at once asserted itself. There was between the two girls a bond of friendship that absences from each other affected not at all.

" I couldn't bear to have anyone but you about me, Namy, now that mother's so ill. She thinks she's so much better every day, and she isn't. You can see she isn't. She's growing weaker and weaker. . . . She keeps wanting Peter, but it's no use sending for him. He couldn't come in time and—oh, Naomi, I feel such a pig. I've been thinking about nothing but my career, and then —this comes and I don't care a pin about my career. It's—nothing. If only I could *do* something for her. . . ."

They talked of Naomi's visit to Roddy, but Naomi couldn't tell even Vivienne about Roddy.

The Vicar seemed hardly to notice this sudden influx of visitors into the Vicarage. He spent all the time he could spare from his parishioners in the sickroom (where two trained nurses had now been installed), passing visitors in the drive or hall with a vaguely courteous smile and greeting, but obviously without recognition. His face looked white and strained, as if, while his body went about as usual, his soul were far away wrestling with God for his wife's life. So given up was he to the secret spiritual battle, that he hardly seemed to realise that Vivienne had come home, though she prepared his meals and insisted on his coming in to them.

§

Mrs. Darrent died quite suddenly the next week, just when she seemed to be beginning to recover.

Naomi went to the Vicarage the day after she heard the news, and she and Vivienne wandered out to the old stables where Peter used to keep his rabbits and his carpentering tools.

"I can't believe it," said Vivienne. "It's like a bad dream. And yet I know she's happy. Naomi, when she knew she was going to die she was so sad to leave father and me, and yet, beneath it all, there was that—that little happy excitement that she always used to have before a 'treat.' Do you remember?"

And Vivienne, sitting in the old broken-down wheelbarrow which had taken part in all their games years ago, laid her head on her knees in the shelter of her arm and sobbed. It was the first time in her life that Naomi had ever seen her cry. . . .

After the funeral Naomi and Vivienne walked together over the downs. Vivienne walked quickly—so quickly that Naomi could hardly keep up with her—her hands in the pockets of her new black coat, her head lowered to the wind. Her face looked white and strained.

"I'm going back to London to-morrow, Naomi. They want me for rehearsals. It's not fair on them to stay away any longer. It isn't as if father needed me."

"Doesn't he need you?"

"No." Vivienne's voice was short. "He's got God. He doesn't need me at all. I know I'm wicked. I've always wanted to come first with him, and I've always been so far behind God that I didn't seem to count at all. When—she died, I make up my mind to give up my work and stay with father. I *wanted* to more than anything else in the world. But—he doesn't need me. . . . All the

time she was ill he was praying every second of the day and night that she mightn't die. But now that she's dead, he's—happy about it. He believes that God knew best. I can't feel like that. . . . He *knows* that she's happy and that he'll meet her again. He's—almost glad to give her to God, because, though he loves her so terribly, he loves God more. He's so kind to me but—Namy, it isn't as if we were comforting each other. He comforts me, but he doesn't need me to comfort him. I feel—shut out. It's wicked of me but I can't help it."

"What's he going to do, Vivienne?"

"He's going to leave Deerford. He wants to go to the North to a slum parish there. If I thought he wanted me—but he doesn't. He'ld hardly know whether I were there or not. I come so far—behind God."

"When must you go back, Vee?"

"To-morrow." Suddenly her thin hand holding Naomi's squeezed it like a vice. "Namy, come with me. Just for a week. It's going to be devilish. I can't bear it alone. The whole thing was—hers, somehow. When I got decent reviews, I only thought of how pleased she'ld be. When anything funny happened I saved it up to tell her. I can't bear it if someone doesn't help me."

§

Humphrey was nice about Naomi's going back to London with Vivienne. In his clumsy way he had tried hard to express his sympathy over Mrs. Darrent's death. And yet she was all the time dimly, half-unconsciously, aware of that new something in him—that faint, bewildered unhappiness, that vague hurt.

Vivienne had only taken the flat the week before her mother died, and it was still half furnished. It consisted

of a set of attics in Bloomsbury, with beams and sloping roofs and an attractive air of quaintness. She threw herself into the work of furnishing it, dragging Naomi about to furniture shops and antique shops, whenever she was not rehearsing. After that outburst on the downs, she had not confided again in Naomi. She was hard and bright, with the hard brightness that Naomi remembered in the child Vivienne when she was badly hurt. The thought of her mother's visit and approval had been the chief incentive in the furnishing of the flat. There was no heart now in the meticulous matching of cretonnes, the hunt for "cottagy antiques," but Vivienne went through it with a sort of swaggering defiance, as if challenging the Fates who had hurt her to say that they had really conquered. She opposed to Naomi the same front that she opposed to the rest of the world. She chattered about the rehearsals, her fellow-actors, and the life of the theatre to which she now belonged, but Naomi knew that, though she withheld her confidence, she asked and received comfort from the unspoken friendship between them, that things would have been worse if she hadn't been there.

While Vivienne was at the theatre rehearsing, Naomi wandered about the parts of London that she had always wanted to explore—Staple Inn, Lincoln's Inn, St. Bartholomew's, Smithfield Market, Limehouse . . .

Now that the shock of Mrs. Darrent's death was fading, her love for Roddy was returning to its old place of supremacy in her thoughts and feelings. She would go to the Embankment and lean against the balustrade, gazing unseeingly at the river, thinking how short a distance separated them. Somehow she felt nearer to him when she was by the river than anywhere. Perhaps he had seen from the tiny workroom window, only a few moments ago, the barges and boats that she was watching

now. Sometimes it was only by a strong effort that she stopped herself from going to the Chelsea house to see him. Always as she went about London, she thought, "Suppose I meet him . . . suppose he's coming round that corner . . . suppose when we sit down to tea he's at the next table. . . ." Once Vivienne said, "If you want to see your charming sister-in-law, Naomi, you must go and see her alone. I think I dislike Elsie-Moireen more than anyone else in the world. I dislike her too much even to study her, and that's a lot for me."

At the end of her visit Vivienne went to the station with her to see her off. She was as bright and flippant as ever, but just as the train steamed in she became suddenly serious.

"Namy, I know you've understood. I should have gone mad if it hadn't been for you——"

Then, quickly, lest she should break down, she hid behind her defences again.

"Well, good-bye, darling. Give my love to Lily if you see her. Tell her to look after Macaulay. Tell her that I thought he looked a bit pale when I saw him last. I think he'ld do with another chest protector."

§

Humphrey wasn't at home when she reached The Towers. He had left a note for her, telling her that he had had to go to Manchester on business, but would be back for lunch the next day. His business occasionally took him up North, and he had once or twice before been unable to return for the night. The news relieved her. Somehow she felt that it would not be so bad if she could have a night alone before she met him again. Except

for the little sitting-room that she had made her own, The Towers was still an alien land to her. She had yielded nothing to it, and it had yielded nothing to her. It didn't represent to her anything of what is meant by the word home. Vivienne's unfinished little attic flat, that she had never seen before that week, seemed more a home to her than this house where she had lived ever since her marriage.

§

Humphrey returned in time for lunch the next day. She had been steeling herself to meet him without any trace of shrinking or indifference, and she was so intent upon acting her part that she had no thought to spare for him. She told him about Vivienne and Vivienne's flat and the purchases they had made for it, talking pleasantly, entertaining him, fulfilling automatically, as she always did, what she considered to be her part of the bargain, and it wasn't till lunch was almost over that she noticed how silent and *distrait* he was. Generally he listened with a rather childlike interest to all she had to say. To-day he seemed hardly to hear her. When lunch was over, she rose and went to the window, looking out at the lawn. The morning mist had cleared, and bright sunshine flooded everything.

"Aren't these days heavenly?" she said.

He had followed her and stood by her at the window, his hands in his pockets.

For a moment he said nothing, then he said slowly:

"Don't wait up for me to-night, Naomi. I shall be kept late at the office. I'll sleep in the dressing-room. I shall be rather pushed for some time now, so perhaps we'd better make the dressing-room arrangement an indefinite one, so as not to disturb you."

His voice was quite normal and steady and no slower than usual, and yet—she had suddenly the sense of being present at some elaborate rehearsal. He'd learnt the words by heart to say to her. And the truth flashed upon her—so suddenly, so amazingly, that she felt for a second stunned and blinded by it. He was in love with another woman. She hadn't wanted his love, had looked upon it indeed as valueless, but the sudden knowledge that it had ceased to exist was as if the solid earth had shifted beneath her feet. She was conscious at first of nothing but a tense effort to conceal her surprise. She must be natural. He mustn't realise that she—understood. She fixed her eyes upon the shadow of the sundial on the lawn, concentrating all her attention upon it, remembering how, earlier in the morning, the sun had melted all the hoar frost on the lawn except the frost that lay in the shadow of the sundial, and how the white sundial of hoar frost had shone and sparkled in the green grass. . . .

The first shock was over. She turned to him and said casually, "All right, Humphrey . . . perhaps it would be best."

He thought that she hadn't suspected. There was relief, but there was haggard misery, too, on his face as he turned away from her. Whatever his new love was, it didn't bring him happiness. . . .

§

She went to her room when he had left her, and sat there, trying to think the matter out, to get things straight. It should, of course, have been so very simple. Humphrey was in love with someone else. That freed her from her bond. It left her ready for Roddy, when Roddy knew—as he must know soon—that they

belonged to each other. And yet—it wasn't as simple as that. Humphrey was unhappy, desperately unhappy, and his unhappiness revealed to her, rather to her surprise, that she felt somehow responsible for him. He had loved her and depended on her, and, even though he had now disowned her love, she couldn't throw off her responsibility for him.

His unhappiness touched and troubled her because she understood it and he didn't. His passion for her had died passion's inevitable death. He had not really loved her, of course, any more than she had loved him. She had satisfied his romantic conception of a perfect woman, but it was the beauty of her body that he had loved, not her soul or her mind. He had never known them. It was inevitable that his passion for her should surfeit itself and then die. But he didn't understand it. He was hurt and bewildered by it. He shrank from her, feeling more a stranger to her than when they had first met. He had turned for forgetfulness to some other woman whose beauty attracted him. It didn't matter who the woman was. Naomi felt as little curiosity as jealousy. She was just a woman who gave him temporary forgetfulness with the new beauty of her body. Or, rather, tried to give him forgetfulness, for he didn't forget. Naomi understood not only his unhappiness but its cause. He was religious, with the simple unquestioning religion of childhood. He didn't palliate to himself what he was doing. It was, in his eyes, a sin. And yet forces beyond his ken, beyond his resistance, seemed to be driving him.

She was conscious of an aching compassion for him, that drew her nearer him than she had ever been before.

PETER came home for a few weeks before Mr. Darrent went to the North-country parish to which he had been appointed. Vivienne, too, was in Deerford for these weeks, going up each evening to the theatre and coming back every night after the performance. The Blue Birds had been received with unexpected enthusiasm in London, and already Vivienne was something of a celebrity. Deerford was not sure that it approved of her. She was so outrageously well dressed nowadays, despite her mourning, so sophisticated, so unlike the harum-scarum little Vicarage girl they had known.

To Peter, this last visit to a home that seemed strange and desolate without his mother's presence, was a sad one. But the first shock of grief was over before he set out for England, and he had looked forward eagerly to seeing Naomi again.

He still loved her, and he still clung to his determination, to marry no one because he could not marry her. He went to The Towers to call on her the first morning after his return. The change in her surprised and troubled him. He himself had changed little, and he had taken for granted that she would still be the girl he had loved before he went abroad. The years, however, had wrought changes in Naomi. Her girlish slenderness had given no hint of the magnificent build of her womanhood. Her figure was regal, and she carried herself proudly. She had lost the shyness that had marked her emergence from childhood. She had grown abrupt and somewhat imperious in manner, and—it was the effect of the repression of her passion—rather quick-tempered. She herself worked hard at anything she undertook—she had to find ceaseless outlets for the exuberant energy of her nature—and she had no patience with slackness and

inefficiency in others. Her fellow-workers and her servants stood in awe of her. Only with Humphrey and Imogen she held in check her impatience whenever it arose.

Peter found her a charming stranger. She wasn't the Naomi he had known, the Naomi whose memory he had cherished so reverently. There was nothing about her to remind him of that Naomi, but the red stain of her lips against the warm gipsy brown of her cheeks, and the dark fire of her eyes. When he parted from her she had been one of his contemporaries, and now she seemed surprisingly to belong to an older generation.

He haunted her drawing-room, as he would have haunted the drawing-room of any charming, sympathetic, older woman, but—it wasn't Naomi.

Once, when they were having tea together, she said to him, "Do you find me very different, Peter?"

"Yes," he blurted out, "you seem so much—older."

She smiled rather crookedly.

"Women grow up more quickly than men, you know."

"Of course, you're married . . ." he said thoughtfully, as if that might help to explain the enigma.

"You like Humphrey, don't you?" she said quickly.

"Yes, I think he's a jolly decent chap."

The two men had got on well from the beginning. To Peter there was no mystery in Naomi's marriage. She had simply met a "jolly decent chap," a better man than he, and fallen in love with him.

"I'm glad you like Humphrey," said Naomi, and added casually, "Aren't you going to run up to see Roddy while you're over?"

Peter laughed.

"I think not. Roddy's too famous and highbrow for

me nowadays. I heard someone talking about his stuff on the way over. He seemed no end of a pot. I shouldn't know what to say to him."

Peter sailed the day before Mr. Darrent finally removed to his new parish. He went back to Africa, with a strange new eagerness at his heart, as one who sets out on a quest that he had thought was closed to him for ever.

Somewhere the world still held the girl he was to marry.

§

Roddy and Moireen came to the Hall for a visit soon after Peter had returned to Africa.

Naomi looked forward eagerly and restlessly to the visit, and then, on the day before they were expected, suddenly decided to go down to Eastbourne, to a Conference of Woman Social Workers that was being held there.

Humphrey made no objection to her going. She was sure that his "affair" was over, but they had tacitly kept the arrangement of separate rooms. Now that she was no longer forced to live upon intimate terms with him, his mannerisms jarred less upon her. There was an honesty in their relations that there had never been before. They could at last see each other clearly.

She spent a turbulent, unhappy week at Eastbourne, attending Conference meetings at which she saw and heard nothing. Every day she decided to go home, and yet when evening came she hadn't gone. She went home finally the day after Roddy and Moireen had returned to London.

§

Humphrey seemed glad at her return, and during dinner kept up a fire of questions about the Conference.

She answered as best she could, trying to hide from him how little interest she had taken in the proceedings. Then she said carelessly :

" Did you see anything of Roddy when he was over ? "

" Not much," he said. " I gathered that he was doing very well. Busts by Roddy, I gathered, are all the rage in Society."

" Busts ? "

" Yes. He's gone in for that now, it seems, and is doing splendidly. Moireen was very much pleased about it."

" Do you like Moireen ? " she said curiously.

" N-no, not much," he admitted. " She's what my aunt would call not jannock."

She smiled, realising again how much nearer to him she felt now that there was no pretence of love between them.

§

She went to the Hall the next morning.

Imogen looked tired, and Naomi, for the first time in her life, felt that she welcomed her.

Imogen talked—volubly for her—about Roddy's success, but Naomi saw that she was not really happy. Her manner was constrained, her enthusiasm forced.

" He's had an exhibition of busts and he's got more orders than he can do. And *quite* absurd prices. He says he'll soon be a millionaire. It's wonderful. He's really famous." Then her constraint vanished and her tired eyes lit up as she said, " Naomi, Moireen's going to have a baby."

Naomi's heart contracted sharply. Then, slowly, Imogen said :

"I'm going to sell the Hall and go to live with Cousin Geraldine."

"Imogen!" said Naomi in surprise.

It was impossible to imagine Imogen apart from her background of the Hall and its garden. She would be like something torn from its roots.

"But—why?"

Imogen shifted her eyes, her beautiful weary lips took a tighter line.

"I'ld—like to go to London. I'ld be nearer Roddy."

Why did she want to be near Roddy now more than before, wondered Naomi. Was it because of the child?

"I can't imagine you in London, Imogen," said Naomi slowly. "Do you think you're wise?"

"I've made up my mind," said Imogen shortly.

"It's nothing to do with money, is it?"

"No. It's just that I want to be near Roddy."

She forgot to tell Humphrey about Imogen's resolve to leave the Hall till they were in the drawing-room, and she was pouring out the coffee from the little coffee machine in which she always made it.

"Humphrey, Imogen's going to sell the Hall and go to live with Cousin Geraldine."

He stared at her in amazement.

"I know," she said. "It seems madness. But she's quite determined."

He became rather silent, and an hour or so later, when she thought he'd quite forgotten about it, he suddenly blurted out:

"Naomi, if your mother's really determined to sell the Hall, how would you like me to take it?"

It was her turn to be amazed.

"*You?*"

He nodded, looking slightly self-conscious.

"Yes. How would you like to live there?"

"But—this place? The Towers?"

"I'ld let this . . . or I think sell it."

"But——" She was still almost too much surprised to speak.

His constraint increased. He looked like a schoolboy shamefacedly and reluctantly admitting himself to be in the wrong.

"I—I wouldn't build this place exactly as it is now if I had it to do over again. I suppose that my—tastes have changed. Would you like to go back to the Hall?"

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind leaving The Towers."

"To tell the truth, I've taken rather a dislike to the place."

Was it because of her, she wondered. Or was it because of his "affair"? Or was it just that his "tastes had changed"?

"I'ld sell it furnished if I got the chance," he went on. "I suppose that your mother would be selling the Hall furnished?"

"Yes. She's going to share Cousin Geraldine's flat."

"If she's quite serious about it, I'll take it and try to get rid of this place."

She thought with a pang of his old pride in the place, of the time when it had been the palace of his dreams, the consummation of all his earthly hopes. She saw him standing at the window, his hands in his pockets, looking down proudly at his gardens. . . .

And—to live at the Hall. What would it be like? Would it be like going home, or would she be an alien in the world of ghosts?

As she lay awake in bed that night she thought neither of The Towers nor the Hall.

She thought of the child that Moireen was going to bear to Roddy. . . .

MOIREEN's effusively worded invitation came as a surprise to Naomi, but this time she didn't hesitate, didn't even leave the decision to Humphrey. She received it as a challenge flung by Fate, and accepted it.

Moireen, looking younger, lovelier than ever, like a piece of exquisite enamel, received her in the little room that had been the drawing-room and was now the "lounge." Everything in the house was so completely altered that it was difficult to believe it was the same place. Nothing seemed to have survived from Naomi's last visit.

"I simply can't bear the same things about me for more than a month, can you?" said Moireen. "It's the same with clothes. Roddy says, 'But you've only had it a few weeks.' Men don't understand, do they, that once a dress has begun to get on a woman's nerves she *must* have something fresh . . .?"

It seemed to Naomi that the very air of this house was infected with restlessness. It was amazing how Moireen kept her youth and freshness in the breathless hurrying from one thing to another that formed her life.

Her slender body gave as yet no hint of the coming child. She was beautifully dressed, and the little house showed signs of luxury that had not been there when Naomi had visited it before.

"Roddy's got a sitter in the studio, darling, so he won't be in just yet. He's got to use the big studio, of course, now that he has sitters. It makes us so cramped. But we're going into a bigger house. I must take you to see it to-morrow, Naomi. It's simply fascinating."

"I'm glad that Roddy's doing well," said Naomi.

"He's doing wonderfully. And, my dear, I work so hard for him. I get him commissions, you know. I've

got him dozens. I get to know the right people, and show them his work. People say that he owes nearly all his success to me. . . . So "—she laughed gaily—"I've a right to a say in how the money should be spent, haven't I?"

"Where is the new house?"

"Strand-on-the-Green, overlooking the river. It's expensive, but so artistic, you know, and central. St. John's Wood's a bit old-fashioned and Chelsea's distinctly overdone."

"There's not much room for nurseries here, of course," said Naomi, looking round. "You're quite wise to go into a bigger house before the child comes."

"The child?" said Moireen vaguely; then, "Oh, yes . . . the child."

The amazing truth struck Naomi. Moireen lived so entirely in the present, that she'd completely forgotten the child, and would continue to forget it till the day came when she couldn't forget it any longer.

"I've got some people coming to tea, darling. You don't mind, do you? I'd meant to keep it clear in case you were tired, but somehow or other it got filled up. Life's such a rush, isn't it? And, of course, people come whether I ask them or not, though there's no decent place for them to dance in now that Roddy uses the studio. That's why I'm longing to get into the new house. . . . I don't suppose you know anyone who's coming. It's ages since you were here, isn't it?"

Naomi mentioned the names of some of the people she had met there on her former visit, but Moireen looked blank.

"Oh, those. . . . Oh, no, I've not seen anything of any of those for ages. No, you'll love the crowd that's coming, Naomi. They're darlings, all of them."

The Lombard girls? asked Naomi. Oh, no, Moireen

never saw the Lombard girls nowadays. Darlings, weren't they? But life was so short that one simply couldn't keep up with everyone. . . . Naomi listened with a puzzled frown. It would have been easier to understand if Moireen ever quarrelled with the people she dropped, but she never did. She never quarrelled with anyone. Everyone was a "darling", but—the novelty wore off, and "life was too short to keep up with everyone."

§

Moireen's friends soon began to arrive. They seemed just the same gay, chattering, beautifully dressed crowd that Naomi had met there before. They were of the type that Moireen inevitably attracted about her, butterflies living in the moment, as ready, for all their show of ardent affection, to drop Moireen and flit on elsewhere as she was to drop them.

"My dear, it's no use trying to dance in here," Moireen was saying. "The studio's the only *possible* room and Roddy has to have that now that he's got sitters. He's doing Leila Derriot now for an admirer of hers. Yes, Isaacson. They say that her husband's going to divorce her, but I think it's doubtful. He's up to the neck in affairs himself. Isaacson's simply paying through the nose for the thing. Roddy, of course, is expected to use a certain amount of tact about her double chin and various other things. It's simply amazing what people will pay for a tactful bust. Roddy gets peevish about it sometimes, but it's ever so much more lucrative than the other things he used to do, and he's got simply more sitters than he can fit in, all ready to pay through the nose for tact. . . ."

"That thing of Mona Laud was sweet."

"Wasn't it? And she's so plain really. That's what's so clever about Roddy. He makes them pretty whether they are or not, but he *does* catch a likeness. I mean, you know at once who it's meant to be, and that's so gratifying to them."

And then the talk drifted off into the incomprehensible jargon of the set—jokes, nicknames, chaff—the flashings of a secret code.

§

A man attached himself to Naomi, not unlike the one who had attached himself to her on her former visit, except that he added a slight intermittent limp to the Byronic necktie. He told Naomi that he had been engaged upon a novel for the past five years, and had never got farther than the second chapter, because whenever he found that it was falling short of perfection, he tore it up and started again.

"Perfection," he said to Naomi, "is my only standard."

Meantime, she gathered, he earned his living by writing under a *nom de guerre* short stories to which he did not apply his only standard.

He seemed to enjoy talking about himself, and to require neither comment nor encouragement. Naomi was free to watch the other people in the room. It was still Moireen whom she wanted to watch. A perfectly turned out youth, good-looking in rather an effeminate way, was sitting with her, bending towards her, touching her hand occasionally with fugitive movements of his own.

He was obviously in love with her. His eyes followed her about the room whenever she left him.

Naomi asked her companion who he was, and her

companion, rather annoyed at being interrupted in the middle of a description of his particular form of artistic temperament, said shortly :

" He's Aubrey Hansom. Lives on his looks. Got an attack of the real thing with Moireen, though. . . . "

That Moireen was pleasurably aware of his love was obvious, but Naomi suspected that, despite the child she was bearing for Roddy, passion had never touched Moireen. She was an adept at flirtations, but she had a genius for evading the unpleasantnesses of life, and she counted passion as one of those. With a husband, of course, one could not evade it, however hard one tried, and Roddy wanted a child. . . .

§

Then there came the sound of Roddy's showing his visitor out, and almost immediately afterwards he entered the little overcrowded " lounge." Naomi's eyes leapt to him, and—her heart sank. She knew now, of course, what that look in Imogen's eyes had meant. She had feared that Moireen was betraying his love for her. But it was worse than that. She was betraying his love for his work. He had never looked like this in the old days. He had looked sullen and resentful, but not like this—not hopeless, bitter, disillusioned.

He had hated his life at the factory, but his joy in his modelling had been a secret solace to him. Moireen had taken that from him. She had done the only thing that could have made life not worth living to him. She had vulgarised his work. . . . That she had killed his love for her in the process, meant nothing to her as long as she had gained her object.

" Has Leila gone, darling ? " she said affectionately.

"Yes," he said curtly.

A constraint had fallen upon the group at his entrance. Aubrey Hansom flushed angrily, and threw a black look at Roddy. Moireen put her hand upon Roddy's sleeve in a pretty, possessive manner.

"Then come and have some tea, darling. You must be starved."

Her eyes were fixed upon Roddy, but she wasn't aware of him at all. She was aware only of Aubrey Hansom, watching her caress with hot eyes and hands that trembled. She wasn't deliberately cruel. It was just part of a game. . . .

Roddy had greeted Naomi shortly, as if not even her presence could lighten the blackness of his spirit. Naomi sat tense and silent. It was terrible to watch the quick contraction of Roddy's brow and his involuntary wince when his wife laid her hand on his arm, to see her tenderness displayed not to soothe him but to attract another man. His shrinking from her meant nothing to Moireen. She didn't even notice it, nor would she have been troubled by it if she had noticed it. She was as insensitive as only a really selfish woman can be.

It was plain that she was intolerably on Roddy's nerves. He could hardly bear to look at her. The sound of her voice made him flinch and bite his lip in uncontrollable irritation. He came over to Naomi and began to talk to her, absently and at random, about people in Deerford, asking questions and not listening to her answers, trying ineffectively to control his nervous irritation. The young people were departing one by one with much hilarious leave-taking and arrangements for meeting at a dance club that evening. . . . A "crowd" exactly like the "crowd" of her former visit . . . and numberless "crowds," perhaps, between them. . . .

A sparkling stream ever flowing through the little house. . . . And Roddy, who loved quiet and a few intimate friends, hated it. . . .

§

They had all gone now except Aubrey Hansom and a pretty girl in green, who hovered admiringly about Moireen like a priestess at a sacred shrine, and who had evidently made a tacit agreement with her not to leave her alone with Aubrey Hansom. The man's face was set and pale but the girls' faces were bright with merriment. They were discussing a common acquaintance.

"I simply can't bear her," Moireen was saying with her little trill of laughter. "They say that she's taken to rhythmic dancing. I'ld love to see her doing it."

Roddy turned his glowering face to her.

"Why? If you hate her so, why would you love to see her doing anything?"

The rudeness of his tone was startling, but Moireen only laughed her care-free trill of laughter.

"Oh, but, darling, that's just *why* one wants to see her doing things."

Roddy turned to Naomi.

"You never saw that bust of yours. I finished it after you'd gone. It's upstairs in the old workroom. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, very much."

They rose.

"No more tea, darling?" said Moireen.

"No, thanks," said Roddy.

His tone was vicious. It was as if he couldn't keep the rudeness from his voice in speaking to her even on the smallest occasions.

"I'll go up first," he went on to Naomi, "and turn the light on."

As she followed him, her handkerchief dropped on the stairs and she stopped to pick it up. From below she heard Aubrey Hansom's savage "The brute! the boor!" and Moireen's laughing "Oh, but Roddy's *always* like that when he's been working on one of his busts. It's just the way it takes him."

§

Upstairs in the little room, Roddy switched on the light, and pointed to the bust that stood alone on the wooden mantelshelf. It wasn't quite Naomi, but it was Naomi as Roddy saw her, as Roddy knew her, a Naomi softened and spiritualised, without her passion, without her imperiousness, the idealised "Namy" of his little-boyhood.

"It's you," he said. "It's the best thing I've ever done. Heaven only knows why I'm fond of it considering that it was this that suggested the bust idea to Moireen, but I am."

"Was it this that suggested it?"

"Yes. She said that, if I could make you look like that, I could make anyone look like anything, or words to that effect. I said, 'Pardon me, that is Naomi. I haven't made her look like anything but what she *is*.' However . . . Moireen saw a fortune in it, and I suppose she was right, because I suppose there is."

"But—you don't like doing it?"

"Sit down and be comfy, Naomi."

The tenseness, the barely-held-in-check irritation, had gone from his manner. She sat down in a low chair by the window, and he stood in front of the mantelpiece, looking down at her.

"No," he said. "I don't like doing it. When one's work has meant all that my work has meant to me, one doesn't take easily to having it degraded to the level of telling smirking lies for money."

He spoke in a lightly flippant voice, but the lines round his mouth seemed to become more deeply graven as he spoke.

"Why did you let her make you do it, Roddy?" she said in a low voice.

He was silent for a minute, then said in a lifeless voice, "Because I couldn't help it."

She knew that it was true. He had the weakness of all sensitive creatures, just as Moireen, despite her pretty air of fragility, had the strength of all insensitive creatures. The struggle between them had been unequal from the first.

He had recovered the light, hard, flippant tone that went so oddly with the lines on his face.

"I'm a rich man, Namy, and I'm going to be richer still. I'm growing famous. I rank nearly as high as a fashionable beauty doctor. I remove double chins. I make nice oval faces where nature made balloons. And I talk prettily to *demi-mondaines* and Society idiots. You know, Naomi, it's one of the richest jokes in the world that I got out of the factory for this. Except for the noise, I'ld rather have the factory any day."

She felt the old, unbearable pity for him. . . . He asked so little of life and life had used him so cruelly. He went on in the same light, flippant tone:

"Well, say it, Naomi. I know you're thinking it. 'Why were you such a weak fool as to give in without a struggle? Why didn't you fight?' I *did* fight. And I was beaten. I *am* a weak fool, Naomi. I'm not fighting again, because when you've once fought and been beaten you don't fight again with the same person.

Not at once, anyway. . . . You see, I can't stand noise. It wasn't noise exactly. It was—the sound of a voice going on and on and on from morning till night saying the same things over and over again. It's quite a pretty voice, as you know, but it nearly drove me mad. And when a man's got to the point when he must either murder his wife or do pretty-pretty busts, a wise man, Naomi, chooses to do pretty-pretty busts."

"Roddy, couldn't you—couldn't you—keep on with your real work as well?"

"No. I tried that. You can't, you know. If you've betrayed something, it's no good sneaking back to it and asking for favours."

"What about Mr. Lombard? Does he——"

"I don't see much of him nowadays. Moireen dropped the girls . . . but that wouldn't have affected my friendship with him. He wasn't keen on the pretty-pretty bust idea, of course, but it wasn't that either. It's a curious fact, Naomi, that even if a man has proved a hundred times that his wife is a liar, he can't hear another man hint at the fact and remain on friendly terms with him afterwards. So entirely are we at the mercy of conventional taboos and inhibitions."

Little trills of laughter floated up from the lounge beneath, where Moireen and the girl in green were stretching their victim on the rack.

Naomi leant her head back against the wall, closing her eyes.

Her misery was an iron band pressing closer and closer about her heart.

"Naomi!"

It was little more than a whisper.

She started up. Roddy was looking at her with something in his eyes that she had never seen there before, something that she had almost lost hope of ever seeing

there. Her heart beat so violently that for a moment she felt suffocated.

Then suddenly between her face and Roddy's, unsummoned, unwelcome, came the face of Cousin Geraldine, wearing that furtive smile that held a hundred unsavoury secrets, as she said, "Naomi, if ever you want to come up to town to meet Roddy quietly, you may meet him at my flat . . ."—that smile that had seemed to besmirch Roddy's love even before it was offered her.

It went and she saw Roddy's face again, but it changed as she looked at it, and became the face of the little boy Roddy, unhappy, frightened, looking to her for comfort.

"Roddikin!"

She spoke breathlessly, but with the tender reassurance that had always comforted him in their childhood.

The spell was broken, the dawning light faded slowly from his face.

For a second she had seemed to him to be, not Naomi, but the ideal woman of his dreams, his love, his heart's desire. And then she moved and spoke, said the word that made him a little boy clinging to her for comfort, became again the sister he had known and loved all his life. He spoke wearily, listlessly, as if the fading of that sudden transfiguring light had left his spirit darker than it was before.

"Oh, well," he said vaguely, "life's a mess-up, anyway, and I suppose it's no use making a song over it."

A gust of trembling seized her, so that she had to clench teeth and fists to hide it from him. She had been offered the thing she most wanted of life and—deliberately or not, she didn't know—she had refused it. The moment was over and would never come again. She had flung away her chance for ever. . . .

Moireen's sweet musical voice called from below. "I say, aren't you ever coming down, you two?"

The girl in green had said for the seventh time that she *really* couldn't stay *any* longer, and had at last collected her bag and furs, and was on the point of going. Moireen was afraid of being left alone with the man she'd been pleasantly goading to a fury of desire all afternoon.

"Do come down. I want Naomi. You've had her long enough."

Naomi rose slowly, and, turning stumblingly to the stairs, said, "I'll go down, Roddy."

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXVIII

It was strange to be living at the Hall again. Humphrey had let The Towers furnished to an American and for some reason that Naomi couldn't fathom, he seemed glad to be rid of it.

He wandered about the Hall with a quiet possessive pride, tinged with a humility that had been absent from his attitude to The Towers. The Hall wasn't something magnificent that he had created. It was something lovely and gracious that deigned to lend itself temporarily to his use.

He liked to think of Naomi's having lived there as a child.

"What does it feel like to be back?" he kept asking her.

He took a conventionally sentimental view of most things, especially human relationships, and he saw her—

an impossibly graceful and beautiful child—flitting up and down the broad oak staircase or playing Hide and Seek with shadowy playmates in the garden.

To Naomi there was more pain than pleasure in this return to her old home. It was haunted by ghosts—by the child that had been herself, by Imogen, by Roddy. She never entered the little room that used to be Roddy's without a sharp stab of pain at her heart.

She was glad, however, to be back in Deerford, though it was no longer the Deerford of her childhood. A new Vicar and his wife were at the Vicarage—a capable, business-like couple with a gift for organisation that outran the bounds of reason.

They had a large family of children on to whom the mantle of energy and conscientiousness had descended so completely that they seemed to bring themselves up with little or no help from their parents.

Mrs. Masterson had died of heart failure quite suddenly the year before. She had left no will and, as the nephew who was her heir said that he " didn't want any of her junk," her possessions were sold by public auction. Deerford felt vaguely outraged by the sight of a husky, red-nosed individual selling Mrs. Masterson's hallowed treasures to strangers in the very house where she had collected and worshipped them.

Macaulay and Lily had built a little cottage at the farther end of the village, because Lily thought that the air of Deerford suited Macaulay better than that of Lainsforth. Naomi often met them out together, Macaulay as carefully mufflered as in his mother's time. Lily had grown stout and placid-looking, as if her position as priestess at the shrine of Macaulay's health suited her. She had persuaded him to give up his botanical expeditions on the ground that they were " draughty," and had bought a little car in which she

drove him into Lainsforth for the services when it was wet. They were quite obviously that very rare thing—a perfectly happy married couple.

Dr. Fuller had retired, and in his place was a Dr. Monkton, a pleasant, good-looking young Scotsman, with humorous eyes, a mobile, sensitive mouth, and that peculiar gentleness of manner that reveals rather than conceals strength. He was very popular in the neighbourhood, especially with his poorer patients, and rather to Naomi's surprise—for Humphrey was in general too slow and reserved to make friends—a quick and firm friendship sprang up between him and Humphrey.

§

Naomi went to stay for a week-end with Vivienne after finally settling into the Hall. The run of the Blue Birds was over, and the company was dispersing. Vivienne was considering taking a hall in the West End and giving a series of character sketches there. Several people had offered to finance her.

"I don't know whether I shall or not," she said to Naomi.

They were sitting on the hearthrug in front of the fire after dinner.

"If father wanted me I'ld rather go to him."

"Doesn't he?"

"No. You see, you don't really count with father unless you're wicked or unhappy."

"You've been to see him since he went up to the North?" said Naomi.

"Yes." Vivienne was like a statue, her eyes fixed on the fire, her face pale and set. "It's—dreadful, Naomi. It's a horrible place. A tumble-down Vicarage

and church and schools. It's a sort of outpost of Anglo-Catholicism but it's nearly taken now. It's—I try not to think of it. They break his windows. He can't get money for anything. When I was there one of them threw a stone at him as he came out of church and cut the side of his face. It wasn't the first time it had happened. They're hooligans. They're—paid to persecute him. Religion?" she said passionately. "They've no religion. Why can't people let other people worship God in the way they want to? I can't understand it. We're separate individuals. Hardly any two of us walk the same way, talk the same way, or—do anything the same way, and yet—it turns these people into maniacs to see anyone worshipping God in any way but the way they worship Him. Why can't they understand that there are as many roads to God as there are souls who go to Him? Wouldn't you think that they'ld be glad for Him to be worshipped? They aren't. They try to defile His worship just because—oh, I can't bear to think of it."

"But, Vivienne, surely you can help him?"

"I can't. I hinder him. I hate them, you see, and he loves them, loves them the more the more outrageous they are. I want to fight them and he won't. . . . He's doing three men's work alone. He's killing himself. I can't bear to see it . . . I can't bear to think about it. . . . Let's talk of something else."

They talked about Peter and Humphrey and Roddy and Moireen. Vivienne had heard from Peter. He had got back to Africa and had found, rather to his surprise, that he was glad to be back. England had seemed stuffy and built-over. . . .

It seemed strange, said Naomi, to be living next to the Vicarage again, and not to see Vivienne and Peter there. . . . They'd altered it and turned the study into the dining-room. . . . Vivienne said that that was

impossible. The study could never be anything but the study, where she'd sat at the big desk having her first lesson, doing pot-hooks and straight lines.

And Roddy . . . how was Roddy? She never saw him nowadays. . . .

Getting on very well, said Naomi. Doing busts of Society people. He wasn't very keen, but Moireen got him commissions. . . . Very gently, very superficially, both shrinking from intimacies even with each other. Vivienne, of course, didn't take for granted that Naomi had married Humphrey for love, as Peter and her father and mother did, nor did she take for granted that she had married him for his money, as the rest of Deerford did. She knew that there were hidden shoals beneath the surface, but so real was their friendship that she wanted to know no more than Naomi wanted to tell her.

§

They went to see Imogen at Cousin Geraldine's. Away from the Hall, Imogen seemed older, frailer, more pathetic than ever. She didn't "go" with Cousin Geraldine's smart, impersonal London flat at all. The only thing she had brought with her from the Hall was the crude painting of a ship that had hung over the mantelpiece in the drawing-room.

It was clear, however, that she had no wish to return to the Hall. Naomi suspected that she connected it with her gradual realisation of Roddy's unhappiness, that she had brooded there in silence till she had begun to hate it. She had thought, too, of course, that she could help Roddy if she were in London, but she had already discovered that she couldn't. Her visits were painful to both of them. Roddy felt her too openly displayed sympathy as the

last drop in his cup of humiliation, and, his jangled nerves beyond his control, was short and boorish with her. They were too near each other to pretend with any success that things were not as they were, but they were not near enough for perfect understanding.

Moireen was sweetly affectionate to Imogen, just as she was sweetly affectionate to Roddy, just as she was sweetly affectionate to each one of her swiftly changing circle of intimates. Moireen saw only what she wanted to see, heard only what she wanted to hear, believed only what she wanted to believe. Once Imogen suddenly and surprisingly lost her self-control, and burst into a passionate accusation. "You don't love Roddy. . . . You've never loved him. You don't care how unhappy he is. . . ."

Moireen listened without giving any sign that she had heard a word, then kissed her, and said, "Well, darling, I've got to run off to an appointment. I hate to leave you, dearest, but you understand, don't you?"

§

Then quite suddenly reality seized her by the throat. She slipped and fell at a Tango Tea, and was brought home in agony. A specialist was summoned, and a nurse installed in the little house. Roddy sent for Imogen, but Imogen was in bed with influenza. She would have gone to him even so, but the doctor and Cousin Geraldine prevented her. Roddy's thoughts then turned naturally to Naomi, and he sent for her. She arrived just as the doctor was telling Roddy that he did not think Moireen would live. She was suffering horribly, and it was pitiful to see her terror. All her affectations, all her little airs and graces, were stripped from her. There was

something stark in her helplessness and fear. She wasn't Moireen any longer. She was Elsie.

From the beginning of her illness she could not bear Roddy to be out of her sight. It was as if she felt that he and he alone could protect her.

"Oh, Roddy darling . . . Roddy, don't go . . . Roddy, I want you so . . . I can't bear it without you . . . sit where I can see you . . . hold my hand. . . ."

And Roddy's whole being had turned to a blaze of pity for her. His estrangement from her was completely forgotten. The nurse had to allow him to be continually in the sickroom, because without him Moireen always lost ground. It was as if she climbed out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death holding on to Roddy's hand.

The doctor ordered her removal to the country as soon as she could be taken there. Naomi went down to Devonshire and found a cottage within reach of the sea, sheltered from the winds. She engaged a woman from the village to help there, and together they prepared it for Roddy and Moireen.

§

Moireen was a ghost of herself, so pale and thin that she seemed almost transparent. And still she turned to Roddy for everything, frightened and unhappy when he was out of her sight. Naomi and the woman from the village did all the work of the house. They hired a car, and Roddy and Moireen went for long drives over the moors. Their old love seemed to have returned completely. Neither had any thought but for the other. The cloudless, languorous summer days passed by so swiftly that one hardly counted them in their flight. Imogen, recovered from her influenza, came down for a

week. The sight of Roddy's happiness brought back the light to her eyes and the colour to her cheeks. She waited on Moireen almost reverently, obeying her slightest whim. Naomi, watching in the background, felt, too, a joy that was still more than half pain at the sight of Roddy, boyish and light-hearted again.

"Trouble has brought them together," Imogen said to Naomi. "It so often does. They'll be all right now."

Naomi tried to believe it, tried to be sure. But she couldn't still the doubt that stirred in her heart. It was Moireen who had made him unhappy. This pitiful, frightened child who turned to him at every moment for comfort wasn't Moireen. What would happen to them all when Moireen came back?

Long happy days in the sunshine. Roddy, sunburnt and care-free; Moireen, growing stronger every day. Long happy days lengthening into weeks, months. . . . And suddenly Moireen was back. Moireen, secure and confident in her youth and health. She came back so gradually that Naomi didn't realise that she had come, till she saw the bright eyes glancing round restlessly in the way she knew so well . . . Moireen bored, eager for change.

"Darling, I'm quite well now. Let's go back to town, shall we? It seems simply ages since we saw anything of anybody, doesn't it."

§

They began to prepare to go back to town. Naomi's heart was a leaden weight as she packed Moireen's pretty, diaphanous frocks. Would Moireen, the old Moireen who had come back, force Roddy again into

bondage? She lay awake all the night before they travelled, tossing from side to side, tormented by her anxiety and her love.

But she might have spared herself.

Before Roddy had been at home a week the war had broken out and he had enlisted.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXIX

THE American who had taken The Towers surrendered his lease to hurry homewards at the first hint of hostilities, and Humphrey handed the place over to the Government as a hospital. Dr. Monkton was attached to it, a matron was sent down from London, and Naomi went there every day as a V.A.D. The place was understaffed and the patients soon began to arrive in greater numbers than they had expected.

Naomi was often almost too much exhausted to stand when she returned to the Hall after her day's work.

Humphrey, too, was working hard, "carrying on" (the phrase had just come into being) at his works with a minimum of helpers. He was always anxious to hear Naomi's account of her day's doings, and, without knowing it, she looked forward to the quiet hours spent with him when her work was over. She did not realise how intricately his friendship was woven into the texture of her life. She took it for granted, as she took for granted the air she breathed and the ground she walked on. He sent extravagant presents of dainties and comforts to the men, but he never visited them, shrinking from appearing before them in his health and strength.

Naomi in those days seemed to be two separate people.

One of them went about her daily duties, performing them carefully and efficiently. The other self—her real self—never left Roddy.

As she dressed the wounds of the men in the wards, she saw Roddy's flesh torn and maimed, she heard Roddy's groan in the groans (rare enough) of the men who lay there suffering. Every minute of every day her thoughts were with him, as if by never relaxing she could protect him from harm. Sometimes she would pause at her work, and her heart would turn over sickeningly as she thought: Suppose that he's—— (she never dared to say the word even in her thoughts). Suppose that even now while I'm thinking of him there *isn't* any Roddy.

§

His first leave meant to her only a blessed relaxation of her anxiety. To be able to wake up in the morning and say, "He's all right. He'll be all right all to-day. He's at home. I needn't wonder whether he's——"

She only saw him once in his first leave. It was a new Roddy, a Roddy she'd never seen before, feverishly excited, flushed, bright-eyed, a Roddy trying to crowd months of enjoyment into a few days. For once he and Moireen were in accord—flying from pleasure to pleasure . . . laughter, noise, excitement . . . the clinking of glasses, the lilt of dance music . . . anything as long as it didn't leave one time to think.

Moireen had constituted herself one of the band of pretty, high-spirited, well-dressed girls, devoted to the entertainment of officers on leave. She put herself, as it were, permanently at their service. They could dance with her, take her about, give her expensive presents and flirt with her. If they fell in love with her, it added

to the excitement, of course, but Moireen's virtue was well protected. She was too shallow to feel passion. For Moireen and her like the war was a godsend. It meant a perpetual round of excitement, a never-ending succession of free-handed cavaliers in becoming uniforms. They took themselves, of course, quite seriously as patriots. They were " cheering up our poor boys." They were " doing their bit." They showed contempt for anyone who was not in uniform, for whatever reason. They gave white feathers to men in the street. Moireen drove Aubrey Hansom to enlist by refusing to go about with him in public because he wasn't in uniform. She was secretly glad when he went to France, because he had lately become what she described as a " nuisance." He came home for one leave, in which he spent all his money on Moireen, and borrowed more from a money-lender to buy her a diamond brooch that she'd set her heart on. Then he went back to the front and was blown up by a trench mortar.

On Roddy's second leave he seemed less excited, more tired. He joined Moireen's butterfly revels reluctantly, as if he'ld rather have stayed at home to rest. At the end of his leave he looked more exhausted than he'd looked when he came home, and the ghost of the old irritation with Moireen was beginning to creep into his manner.

§

Vivienne had abandoned her idea of giving recitations, and had gathered the remains of the Blue Birds together to tour the hospitals. She paid a flying visit to The Towers, staying with Naomi at the Hall, and standing at the landing window to watch the Vicarage children playing in the garden.

"I feel that fire ought to come down from Heaven to consume that one with the pigtails and blue frock who's daring to sit on my branch of the copper beech. Even Peter never dared to do that."

Peter had come over to enlist and had been sent to Mesopotamia, so they saw nothing of him. He had written to tell Naomi of his engagement to a girl in Africa. "She reminds me of you," he said; "that's what made me fall in love with her."

He enclosed the photograph of a fat and rather stupid-looking girl, who nevertheless gave an impression of kindliness and good-humour.

"Good for my vanity," said Naomi to Vivienne, "but she looks quite nice."

"Oh, Peter would see you in any girl he fell in love with," said Vivienne.

§

Roddy arrived home for leave the third time just when they were busier at The Towers than they had been since the beginning of the war. Naomi could not get up to town to see him till the last night of his leave, and she might not have managed it then, if she hadn't received a pressing invitation from Moireen that made her vaguely uneasy, she didn't know why. So she made her arrangements, and set off as soon as she could after tea, reaching Chelsea (the removal to the Strand-on-the-Green house had been indefinitely postponed) in time for dinner.

Roddy seemed quite cheerful. He talked a good deal, using all the latest slang, but his face was lined and set, and he talked and moved like a man in his sleep. He gave you the impression of not hearing or seeing anything that went on around him. He was an automaton.

Moireen was more restless than Naomi had ever seen

her. Roddy's coming home on leave wasn't a novelty any longer. It merely upset her plans Moreover, Moireen was with child again, and this time she couldn't ignore it. Her miscarriage had frightened her, and she was resentful against Roddy for wanting a child so badly that he had once more worn down her reluctance.

"Darling," said Moireen suddenly in the middle of dinner, "I suppose you must go almost *directly* after dinner. It's *too* cruel!"

Roddy turned to her slowly in surprise.

"What do you mean? My leave isn't up till to-morrow. I needn't go till after breakfast."

Moireen gave a little cry of dismay.

"Oh, *sweetheart*! How *dreadful*! I was *sure* somehow that you had to go to-night."

"Does it make much difference?"

"Well—I'd arranged to run out and spend the night with the Bartons at Ascot. I *quite* thought that you went back to-night. Billy was coming to fetch me. They're getting up a cabaret show. It's to go on till two, so everyone's sleeping there. . . . I'll ring up and tell them that you'll be coming with me."

"No, don't do that. I don't want to come."

"Oh, *darling*!"

"You go alone."

"But——"

"I shall be quite all right. I'm tired. I shall turn in early. I'ld like you to go."

"Oh, but it seems——"

"No, it doesn't. I shall see you to-morrow."

"You see, I *quite* thought that you went back to-night."

You didn't; thought Naomi bitterly. You only pretended to, because you didn't want to miss the party at Ascot. That's why you begged me to come, because

not even you dared have left him quite alone. You wouldn't care even if we were lovers. . . .

Moireen became bright and eager and happy again. She chattered gaily as they had coffee in the studio, and took an affectionate farewell of Roddy, seeming not to notice his unresponsiveness.

"I shouldn't leave you, sweetheart, if Naomi weren't here, and I *know* she'll look after you so well . . . and I'll be back first thing to-morrow. Good-bye, angels. Look after each other. Here's Billy."

She kissed her hand to them and vanished.

They heard a man's voice outside, laughter, and the sound of a car dying away in the distance.

Roddy stood for a moment staring in front of him, then roused himself as if with an effort, and looked about the room.

"Let's go upstairs, shall we?" he said. "I've taken a dislike to this room somehow."

§

In his workroom, he pushed her gently into the chair by the fire and, moving a stool to her feet, sat on it, resting his head against her knees, and closing his eyes. She spoke unsteadily, trying to give him the comfort that she knew he needed.

"Roddy, look forward, look to the end of it. It's bound to come to an end soon. And then you'll be back at your work again."

"I shall never do any more work."

"Oh, Roddy, don't say that."

"I don't mean that I think I'm going to be killed or anything silly like that; I simply mean that—I shan't take any interest in my work again. I shan't take—any interest—in anything."

"Roddy, tell me about it. . . . Is it so dreadful?"

His face twitched, then suddenly broke up. He was sobbing, his face buried in her bosom, as he had sobbed when he was a little boy—sobbing not as a child now, but with the terrible abandon of a man's nerves strained beyond the breaking-point.

"It's the noise, Naomi. . . . I can stand anything but the noise. . . . I can't bear it . . . it hasn't stopped once since I came home. . . . I can hear it all the time . . . the noise going on and on and on. . . . I can hear people speaking through it, but it's always there behind your voices . . . louder than your voices. . . . I feel that if I can't get away from it I shall go mad. It goes on all the night. . . . I can't sleep. . . ."

She held him to her, stroking his hair, kissing his eyes, his cheeks, his lips, murmuring endearments to him, her heart a white flame of pity—pity so intense that it left her love purified of passion.

He lifted his face. It was disfigured by his tears but the mask-like look was gone from it.

"I'm sorry," he said unsteadily. "I've been afraid of that happening, but—I don't mind with you, Namy. You're part of me, somehow."

She drew his head against her breast again, still stroking his hair.

He was silent for some moments, then he raised his hands—thin, nervous, artist's hands—and groped for hers.

"Naomi, no one in all the world ever had a sister like you."

Tears were rolling down her cheeks. They dropped on to her hands and left a salt taste in her mouth. His eyes were closed and with the exhaustion on his thin pale face there was peace. His breathing became deeper, more regular. His body relaxed against her. She sat there,

holding him, not daring to move, her limbs aching with a weariness that she endured with a sort of exaltation, till dawn came and found him still sleeping in her arms.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXX

But, of course, though her pity for him remained, passion crept into her love again. It lay in wait for her like an enemy at every corner of the old house where he had lived, and she had no defences to keep it out.

She was glad to go to Vivienne's London flat for a week-end. The Blue Birds company was disintegrating fast, as the men left its ranks to join the army, and the girls to join the W.A.A.C.'s and W.R.E.N.'s. It was Vivienne's talent alone now that held it together. Her supporters were mediocre, but her vitality and power of mimicry made it still the most popular of the many companies that toured the hospitals. Vivienne was making arrangements to take it out to France. She was spending the week-end at her London flat in order to rest, but the news of her being there had spread quickly through her world, and on Sunday night her flat was full of people. It was amazing, thought Naomi, how Vivienne, remote herself and shunning intimacy, seemed always to be pursued by a crowd of people anxious to put themselves upon a footing of friendship with her. Naomi was surprised to see Dr. Monkton enter the little room, and Vivienne, too, seemed taken aback by his appearance. He looked curiously out of place among the rather consciously literary and artistic folk who gathered around Vivienne. He sat there, silent and

awkward but determined-looking, his gaze following Vivienne wherever she went.

A little film actress held the floor most of the evening —a creature so lovely, so perfect in every detail that she took your breath away. She talked the most incredible nonsense, retailing pointless anecdote after pointless anecdote, dragging them out to their utmost length and repeating the last sentence of each several times while she thought of something else to say. It was as if she could not bear to relinquish the position that her entry into a room always won her. Her beauty was amazing, her conceit like an iron wall, and her imbecility beyond description.

Vivienne watched and listened, hazel eyes sparkling with amusement, lips twisted into a faint smile. She was, Naomi knew, studying her, adding her to her collection. When she had gone she would be able to reproduce it all perfectly—the drawling complacent little voice, the pointless anecdotes, the little pattings of hair and dress, the toss of the head. . . ."

Dr. Monkton went away first, saying that he was due back at the hospital. That was the only remark he had volunteered since entering the room.

"Why Dr. Monkton, Vee?" said Naomi when they had all gone.

Vivienne laughed.

"I've no idea. I was quite as surprised as you. After we'd done the show at The Towers, he asked when he could see me again, and I said that when I was in town people came to see me on Sunday evenings, but I never let him know that I'ld be in town this week-end."

"He's probably been up every Sunday evening since on spec. He looks the type to do things thoroughly."

Vivienne laughed carelessly, but Naomi had noticed a difference in her that evening. She had seemed more

stable, somehow, happier, less cynical. . . . Naomi wondered whether the change—so slight that none but she could have noticed it—were connected with the doctor's visit.

§

Naomi went back to Deerford on Monday. In the train the torturing anxiety for Roddy seized her again. Her forgetfulness of him in Vivienne's flat seemed treachery. Her thoughts went out to him, guarding, protecting him, holding him safe from danger. The noise of the train seemed to sing a sort of refrain with her thoughts ("Oh, God, keep him safe, keep him safe, keep him safe . . .").

She had hoped to reach the Hall before Humphrey returned from work, but he was there in the drawing-room when she arrived, standing in front of the fire, his hands behind him, waiting for her.

She sat down on the arm-chair by the hearth (Imogen's chair) and began to draw off her gloves.

"You're back early, aren't you, Humphrey?" she said.

He nodded absently. He looked self-conscious and solemn. She began to tell him about her visit to Vivienne, but his interest was perfunctory. She realised that there was something he wanted to say to her, but didn't know how to begin. She was tired by her journey, worn out by overwork and her anxiety about Roddy, and she felt a shrinking from anything that would make further demands on her. With a vague idea of postponing whatever was coming, she rose, gathering up her gloves and furs, and turned towards the door.

"Naomi."

At the tone of his voice she swung round, her heart beating quickly.

"Yes. What is it?"

He stood and looked at her—bulky, thick-set, portentously solemn.

"There's something I must tell you. . . . I've wanted to for some time."

She knew suddenly what was coming, and felt that at all costs she must stop him saying it.

"Don't . . . don't, Humphrey," she said breathlessly.

But he had begun his confession, and nothing short of an earthquake would have stopped him.

"I've been unfaithful to you."

"I know. I knew. Don't . . ."

But he ignored her and went on clumsily, doggedly, with the story he had set himself to tell.

"I never really cared for her. She was a woman who used to travel in the same train and——"

She made a gesture of dismissal.

"Don't tell me about her, Humphrey. It doesn't matter who she was."

"No, I suppose it doesn't," he said slowly. "I suppose that all that matters is that I was unfaithful."

She said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on the fire, her mouth set in a tight line.

"I want you to forgive me, Naomi," he said.

She sat down suddenly in the chair she had just left, and spoke in a dull, lifeless voice, without taking her eyes from the flames.

"There's nothing to forgive. . . . At any time all these years I'ld have gone to Roddy if he'd wanted me. I didn't know when I married you, but I knew soon afterwards. . . ."

She stopped, then went on jerkily as if with an effort:

" Roddy's—never—cared for me—that way and never will."

He sat down by her, and laid his large, unshapely hand tentatively upon hers.

" I'm sorry, lass," he said gently.

She smiled crookedly.

" You're good, Humphrey," she said. " I've always known you were good. If only—things didn't—take one by the throat so."

She leant back in her chair and there was a long silence. She had not withdrawn her hand from his. Suddenly she said :

" Humphrey, I'ld have gone to Roddy if he'd wanted me, but—I'ld have known it was wrong. I wouldn't have felt about it as—people feel about it nowadays, that it—doesn't matter, that it's—right. When I reasoned it out it seemed right. I could—prove to myself that it was right, and yet—something in me deeper than that knew that it wasn't. You felt like that, didn't you ? "

" Yes."

" Why ? "

He was silent. She went on :

" It's—something outside oneself, deeper than oneself, that—knows, isn't it ? I wonder what it is."

He spoke slowly, as if struggling with his inarticulateness.

" Maybe," he said, " it's something to do with our people, the people we were bred from."

" Yours were North-country Puritans and mine were gipsies. Perhaps that's it. They knew that it was wrong and why. We only know that it's wrong. We've forgotten why."

She had withdrawn her hand, and he had made no movement to take it again. They sat silent, side by side, gazing into the fire.

An understanding, deeper than love, deeper than sympathy, an understanding that went back beyond them to the stock from which they were born, lay between them.

Then the telephone bell rang in the hall and a maid summoned Naomi. The spell was broken. Humphrey stirred uneasily in his chair, watching the door for her return.

He heard her say, "Yes, I'll come at once," and then she appeared in the doorway. Her face was drained of colour, and her eyes looked unnaturally big and dark.

"It's Cousin Geraldine," she said. "She wants me to go to Imogen at once. Roddy's been killed."

IMOGEN was sitting in Cousin Geraldine's drawing-room, staring in front of her with set, white face.

"She fainted when she heard," whispered Cousin Geraldine, "and she's looked like that ever since she came round. I can't get her to speak."

Naomi stood there, still in her outdoor things, looking across the room at Imogen, her breast rising and falling, waiting for Imogen to notice her.

"Speak to her," said Cousin Geraldine.

Naomi tried to, but her throat was dry and no words would come.

Then Imogen turned her head, and for a minute they stared into each other's eyes.

Neither knew which made the first move, but in a

second Naomi had run across the room with a cry of "Mother!" and Imogen was sobbing in her arms.

"Take me home, Naomi," she said when the first violence of her grief was spent.

"I'll take you first thing in the morning, dear," said Naomi soothingly, as she would have spoken to a child.

They put her to bed, and Naomi and Cousin Geraldine had dinner together in the little modern dining-room. Cousin Geraldine talked casually of casual matters till bedtime, her tinkling only slightly subdued.

As Naomi was going to bed, Cousin Geraldine turned to her suddenly and said:

"You're a little fool, Naomi. Why didn't you take Roddy while you could?"

"Roddy never wanted me—that way," said Naomi steadily.

"You could have had him if you'd tried," said Cousin Geraldine.

§

The doctor had said that Imogen must not go to Deerford till the end of the week, but her restlessness and her longing to return to the Hall was so obviously delaying her progress that they let Naomi take her back after only two days.

Naomi made the preparations for the journey mechanically. She felt as if she had died with Roddy and were dragging her dead body about with her, forcing it to move and speak and perform the duties it had performed in its lifetime. She envied Roddy his real death. . . . He hadn't to pretend that he was alive. It was easier for him.

They travelled to Deerford by car, and Humphrey was there at the door to receive them.

Imogen seemed to have forgotten why she had been away. It was as if she had forgotten everything that had happened since she had left the Hall, as if she thought that she had merely returned from a short holiday. The doctor had warned Naomi that probably her "faint" had been in the nature of a slight stroke. She looked out at the garden, and began eagerly to make plans for the next day.

"The chrysanthemum cuttings haven't been made. . . . I'll do it to-morrow."

Naomi sat by her bed till she went to sleep. Looking at her, Naomi realised with a shock that this was an old woman, as grey and fragile as gossamer. Though Imogen had aged greatly in the last few years, Naomi had still seen her as the idol of her childhood. Now her seizure had put, as it were, the final touches of old age upon her.

"It's so nice to be back, dear," she said in a whisper that was barely audible, then slid into a deep, childlike sleep.

§

Naomi went downstairs to the drawing-room where Humphrey sat by the fire. She slipped into the seat by him. Neither of them spoke. It might have been that moment two nights ago just before Naomi was summoned to the telephone.

"I'm sorry, Naomi," he said.

His sympathy didn't jar on her. She said:

"Imogen will live here. You don't mind, do you?"

"N-no."

He spoke uncertainly, not as if he minded, but as if his thoughts were somewhere else. After a silence he said:

"I was going to tell you something the other night."

"You told me."

"Not that. I told you that first because of the other thing. I wanted to tell you that I was going to leave old Masters in charge of the business and join up. I did it to-day. I have to go into training on Saturday."

She'd thought that she was dead but she wasn't quite. She had had her moment of black despair at Roddy's death, but she realised that there had been something of relief—a dull, heavy, unconscious relief, but still a relief—in the cessation of her anxiety. And now it all had to begin again for Humphrey—that agonising accompanying of him in her thoughts, that daily, hourly, minutely following of him from duty to duty, that heart-sickening "Suppose even now he's wounded . . . suppose he's a prisoner . . . suppose he's——", that vigilant, unrelaxing defence of him by the power of her thoughts (but it hadn't been able to defend Roddy), that waiting for news that was a physical torment. It all had to begin again for Humphrey. It was like a part of the deadness of her waking agonisingly to life.

"I felt I had to. You understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

After another short silence he glanced at her and said:

"You look tired out. Why don't you go to bed?"

"I think I will."

She rose wearily and went to the door. There she turned and said jerkily:

"Would you like to come back to me, Humphrey?"

"If you'll let me," he said simply.

Humphrey was rushed out to France after the short course of training that was growing even shorter as men were needed in greater and greater numbers to fill up the gaps at the front.

He took a deep interest in the scientific side of the war. His sole reading nowadays was military memoirs and the study of strategy and tactics. It was characteristic of him. He was always heavily, conscientiously absorbed in anything he took up. He lacked the light touch in every relation.

The darker side of the war didn't affect him much. He was of coarser clay than Roddy. The sights of suffering and brutality disgusted him, but he was unimaginative and their effect was transitory.

When he came home on leave he talked of little but the war—its progress on the various fronts and the plans of campaign behind it. He took a surprisingly (and, to Naomi, rather irritatingly) impersonal view of it. He had maps of all the battle points spread out on the study table with a bewildering array of little flags pinned into them. He studied the news with slow solemn concentration each morning, and moved his little flags about in accordance with the latest reports. When he went back to the front he asked Naomi to move them for him, and almost the first thing he did when he came home for his next leave was to go and inspect them.

§

Moireen had, according to her circle, been " splendid " about Roddy's death. She had, in short, continued her butterfly revels as if he hadn't died at all.

"I think you're the most marvellously plucky woman I've ever seen," said her latest admirer.

He was taking her to dinner at the Ritz, afterwards to a box at the latest show, then to supper again at the Ritz. He'd already spent more than all his pay and savings upon her.

And Moireen answered with her sweet smile:

"But you see I don't grudge even Roddy to my country."

"You're *marvellous*," he said.

And Moireen, who always saw herself as her admirers saw her, honestly believed that she was.

The vogue of Spiritualism was spreading slowly and insidiously throughout England, and Moireen, attracted by its novelty, fell a victim to it. She was as unbalanced in that as she was in everything else. She attended séances continually, and brought back a string of platitudes or pieces of fulsome flattery as Roddy's "messages." She wrote to Naomi about it.

"Darling, it's *wonderful*. *Marvellous*. It's Roddy himself speaking to me. He says that I'm *marvellously* plucky, and he says that we must just keep on keeping on bravely as we are doing, and everything will be all right. He says that he's perfectly happy. He says that he gets the same sort of cigarettes there as he got here."

If it had been only Moireen, Naomi would have felt merely a faintly amused disgust, but it wasn't only Moireen. It was the child. She was herself carrying Humphrey's child now, but it was on Roddy's child, exposed to the risks of Moireen's careless, self-indulgent life, that her anxieties were centred.

She asked Moireen to come over to see her and Moireen came.

"Now, darling," said Moireen as soon as she entered the drawing-room, "I want you to begin automatic writing

with me at once. I don't want to keep Roddy waiting. I think that you and I together ought to get the most *marvellous* results."

"I'm not going to, Moireen," said Naomi, "that's why I wanted you to come. I wanted to talk to you about it. Don't you see how *horrible* it is, Moireen? It can't be Roddy. Have you ever heard Roddy talk such futile rubbish?"

"You don't understand, Naomi," said Moireen with dignity. "Roddy sends the most *beautiful* messages to me. *Really* beautiful. He said only last week that he was doing most *wonderful* work over there."

"What sort of work?"

"He said he was drawing."

"Roddy never drew."

"I said that, and he said that what he'd meant was that he was drawing souls to God. Isn't that one of the most *beautiful* things you've ever heard, Naomi?"

"No, it isn't."

"I don't understand you, Naomi," said Moireen. "I knew that you weren't sympathetic, but I never thought of you somehow as irreligious."

"I'm not irreligious. There's no religion in this. It's utterly materialistic. You have to see and touch and smell. It leaves no room at all for faith. There's nothing religious in rank materialism, and that's what it is."

"Oh, no, it isn't, Naomi. You don't understand. I didn't understand till Roddy got through to me, but he's teaching me. I wasn't religious before, but I am now. Roddy says that I'm finer and more spiritual than most women. You don't understand, dear, because—you mustn't mind my being quite frank with you—you're at the bottom of the hill. Roddy says that my soul is attuned to the heights. He says that he's always with me, and soon I'll be able to see him."

Naomi shuddered.

"Moireen, it's not Roddy. How *can* you think it is? . . . Do give it up. It can't be good for the child."

"Oh, but it is, Naomi. *Truly* it is. Roddy says that its soul will be like mine, attuned to the heights."

It was horrible to hear Roddy's name in this tangle of inane futilities, but it was as impossible to convince Moireen of the charlatanism of the whole affair as it was to stop her prattling about it. Naomi listened to her, sick at heart. She hadn't been like this when Naomi first met her. She'd been shallow and rootless and insincere, but she hadn't been like this. She was deteriorating with the years. She'd been letting herself go ever since her marriage.

As Moireen went out of the drawing-room, Imogen was coming from the little room that she used as a sitting-room—frail and bent, leaning on a stick.

Moireen didn't see her. She was still talking animatedly to Naomi.

Imogen stood and watched her till she had disappeared. As Naomi turned back from the door she said:

"Who was that girl, dear? I seemed to know the face."

§

It was strange for Naomi to remember how wistfully and how unavailingly she had in this very house hungered for Imogen's love. It flowed out over her now in a rich unceasing stream. Imogen was restless and ill at ease whenever she was out of her sight. Whenever she spoke to Naomi, there was in her voice not only the tenderness that she had shown to Roddy, but a richer, deeper tenderness that her natural reserve had made her hide from him. Her memory was weakening, and she

often failed to recognise people. She was happier and more at peace in this clouding of her intellect than she had ever been before. It was as if nothing mattered to her as long as she could be with Naomi.

Sometimes Naomi seemed to see the child that had been herself—wistful, brooding, unhappy—lurking in the shadows of the house, and say to her gently, consolingly . . . "It's all right. . . . She loves you now. . . . It's all right now."

Vivienne wrote to her briefly to tell her of Mr. Darrent's death.

"It was neglected influenza. I went up as soon as I heard, and did what I could, but it was too late. He knew that he was dying. He said, 'God is calling me to other work,' and to me, 'I've always been so proud of you.' Do you remember how I used to hate his being proud of me? I didn't then. As I sat there by his bed, though we didn't say a word, all that went away, and I felt happier than I've ever felt in my life. I felt as if we saw each other quite clearly. I didn't grudge him to God. He was right. I know. God needs him for other work. Do you remember how wonderful he always was with boys and young men, and there must be thousands of them now passing from life, frightened and unprepared. . . ."

Naomi thought of the rows of youths that had blocked her view in the little church on the Sunday when she tried to see if Imogen and Roddy were there when she was staying at the Vicarage. . . .

Perhaps even now he was with one of them on the other side, meeting, comforting, explaining, guiding. . . .

The letter went on:

"I take the Blue Birds over to France next week. Hope I run into Humphrey."

MOIREEN's child—a boy—was born in the early summer. The birth was easy, the child healthy and well formed, with dark hair and dark eyes like Roddy. Moireen enjoyed motherhood with all her easy shallow powers of enjoyment. She was strongly alive to the romantic appeal of her position—the young " war widow " with her fatherless child. Her friends, of course, rallied round her. She was " wonderful," she was " marvellous." She lay in bed, dressed in becoming *négligées*, and received visitors. The return of her health and youth was a sort of sensual joy to her.

Naomi gazed hungrily at the little face that was so appealingly like Roddy's. Already she felt some bond between her and the child. He seemed more hers than the child that was in her womb. And from the beginning he seemed to know her. She could sooth him when everyone else failed. The nurse said with a laugh: " He's quite taken to you, Mrs. Belson. I never saw anything like it."

Moireen's strength gradually returned, and the novelty of her motherhood wore off. The monthly nurse departed, a nursemaid was installed, and Moireen returned to her butterfly existence. It wasn't " wonderful " to be a mother any longer. The baby was a nuisance and an expense, although she cut down the expenses connected with him to a minimum. The nursemaid was a girl who had just left school, and the " nursery " was her bedroom.

" I'm not one of those mothers who *fuss*," said Moireen when she referred to her motherhood. " I think that fussing is so bad for a child."

Absorbed again in her breathless round of gaieties (she had, of course, long ago given up Spiritualism), her kaleidoscopic circle of friends, she neglected the child

completely. Naomi suspected that, though she would have extracted the utmost pathos from the situation, his death would not have been entirely unwelcome to her. He did not thrive. He seemed always fretful and uncomfortable. When Naomi was there, he would turn his dark eyes to her with a look that tore her heart, as if imploring her to help him. And it was as if Roddy, too, were pleading with her . . . Roddy, who had longed for this child and would have been so proud of him. Naomi's own time was almost upon her, but she could think of nothing but Roddy's son. She lay awake at night in a fever of impotent indignation, remembering his discomfort, his needs ignored, his little body sore and chafed from lack of attention. The nursemaid was lazy and ignorant. "It does them good to cry," she said sullenly to Naomi when Naomi entered the "nursery", and found him screaming with pain in his cot, while the nursemaid sat by the window engrossed in a novelette. Even when Naomi showed her the spoon on which he had been lying, she only set her lips and tossed her head.

On one occasion Naomi, finding proof of actual neglect, had flown into one of her royal rages. The nursemaid was terrified, and, after that, when she knew that Naomi was coming, bestirred herself to have her charge moderately fresh and clean. But, of course, Naomi couldn't always be there, and that fact was a great comfort to the little nursemaid. When Naomi protested to Moireen, Moireen, who now disliked being reminded of the child's existence in any way, laughed shortly and said:

"Darling, how ridiculous you are! It's so *bad* for a child to be fussed over as you fuss over Bobby. I'm *quite* satisfied with the way she looks after him, and as I'm his mother that surely is all that matters."

Naomi's nerves were in an abnormal state. She

passed feverishly wakeful nights, or slid into uneasy dreams in which Roddy came to her and begged her to save his child.

Her nurse had been installed at the Hall. She tried to stop these daily visits to London, on which Naomi refused to allow anyone to accompany her, but Naomi turned on her in one of those passions that she now deliberately summoned in order to get her way. In the weakening of her nerves and will that was part of her condition, she had come to rely on means that she despised in her normal state. She had to protect Roddy's child. It was impossible, of course, to convince other people of this by arguments, and so she had to terrify them into letting her have her way. The nurse gave way, because she dared not oppose her, and Naomi hurried breathlessly to the little house in Chelsea. She felt desperate. It would probably be the last visit before her confinement. What would happen to Bobby in the long weeks, when his nursemaid knew herself to be free from the possibility of her visits?

Moireen, of course, was out. Naomi went as quickly as she could up the stairs to the little bedroom, and seized the child eagerly in her arms. He smiled delightedly and stretched out tiny hands to pat her face. The touch of them—as soft as petals—tugged unbearably at her heart. . . . Her eyes scanned his face anxiously. His skin was waxlike, his eyes lack-lustre. There was something heart-rendingly patient about him. She turned to the nursemaid who stood sulkily by, and spoke in a tense, unsteady voice.

"Does he get out enough?"

"I take him out every afternoon. There's too much to do here to take him out mornings as well."

"How long do you take him out in the afternoons?"

"Two hours."

"Where do you go?"

"To the Park."

"Have you done everything as I told you last time?"

"Yes," said the girl with the readiness of a practised liar.

§

Naomi prepared the baby for his afternoon walk, saw him off with the nursemaid, and turned as if to go to the station; then, when they had disappeared, turned back again and began to follow them, slipping stealthily from corner to corner behind them.

People looked at her curiously. She was a big, handsome woman, conspicuous at any time, and now her eyes were flashing, her cheeks flushed and her advanced state of pregnancy very apparent. She was as unaware of the curious eyes that followed her as she was of everything else in the world but her quarry.

She followed the girl to one of those squalid streets that are always lurking round the corner of Chelsea's conscious prosperity. There, at an area gate, the girl stopped, took the baby from the pram, and disappeared down the steps to the basement. Some children were playing by the gate. Naomi went up to them:

"Where has that girl gone?"

They stared at her in amazement, then one of them said:

"To her mother's. Her mother's got the room down there."

"Does she come here every afternoon?"

"Yes. Brings the baby an' stays with her mother an' has her tea with her. She's the baby's nurse. Gets ten shillings a week. Lucky, isn't she?"

It was a tornado that burst into the dark airless basement room where an unsavoury woman was rocking

Bobby on her knees, one grimy finger thrust into the little mouth to quiet him. The two women quailed in terror before her. In the middle of her passion Naomi felt the pang shoot through her body that told her that her own pains were beginning, but she did not heed it.

She snatched the child from the woman and went back to the pram, followed by the terrified nursemaid. But as soon as they reached the main road, there came another pang so violent that Naomi couldn't ignore it any longer. Feeling the blind, helpless panic of a trapped animal, she hailed a passing taxi, and told the man to drive as fast as he could to Victoria Station.

She only just reached home in time. Her twins were born before they could get her upstairs.

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXXIV

She lay in bed, feverish and exhausted, tormented still by her anxiety about Bobby. She could give no thought to her own children—two fine girls, children of her magnificent body not of her distracted mind. They were healthy and well-cared-for. It was over Roddy's child, neglected and unwanted, that her passionate mother-love brooded. Her leaving him before she had told Moireen of the nursemaid's deception, was in her eyes a supreme treachery.

As soon as she had recovered sufficiently from the birth of her own children, she made her nurse telephone to Moireen to tell her what had happened. But Moireen was growing tired of Naomi's interference. She said that she had questioned the girl, and the girl said that she only went to her mother to ask advice about Bobby,

and that the mother had had a lot of experience and was very fond of Bobby, and she, Moireen, could see no harm in it. She added that now Naomi had children of her own, she supposed that they must make up their minds to see less of her. This message threw Naomi into a ferment of agitation. She saw Bobby continually . . . lying neglected and in discomfort in his none too fresh cot . . . on the woman's knee in the basement room, sucking at the grimy, black-nailed finger. . . . A frail flickering breath of life, so easily extinguished. . . . Roddy's son. . . . In her delirium she would start up in bed, her brow wet with perspiration, to face a stern Roddy who said, "Why didn't you take care of him? Why have you let them kill him?"

"Don't!" she panted. "Roddy, don't! I couldn't help it. They won't let me go to him, Roddy. They won't let me go to him."

The nurse couldn't understand it.

"She seems to be worrying about Mrs. Godstone's baby. I've rung up Mrs. Godstone to make sure he's all right, and Mrs. Godstone says that except for a cold he's perfectly well. . . ."

She tried to charm Naomi from this nightmare of anxiety by interesting her in her own babies, but it was useless. The sight of their rosy well-being only sent Naomi's thoughts to the other child . . . his thin frame, his wax-like face, his sore, neglected little limbs.

Naomi's body and mind, however, were splendidly healthy, and her recovery was a quick one. She had in her the nervous sensitiveness of her poet father, but she had, too, the physical strength of the women who had brought forth children unaided, and gone on again following the caravans.

Once she had touched the bottom of her weakness and depression, she regained strength quickly. Vitality

returned to her body, and hope to her mind. She still thought only of Bobby, but she smiled at Roddy's ghost now, and said, "It's all right, Roddy. I'm going to him. I'm nearly well now. I'll go to him the minute they let me."

Her nurse had been surprised at the speed of her recovery, but she gasped with dismay when Naomi calmly informed her that she was going up to London. She dared not protest, however, for she stood in awe of Naomi's imperious temper.

Over and over again she lamented that Mr. Belson could not be at home to relieve her of part of her responsibility. Humphrey had hoped to get leave, but things were going badly in France, and all leave had been stopped.

§

To Naomi the journey to Chelsea seemed endless. Her heart was singing with love and exaltation. "I'm going to him, Roddy," it sang. "I won't let them hurt him any more."

She had formed her plans. She was going to ask Moireen to let Bobby stay with her. She'ld beg her, plead with her. And then—oh, once she'd got him, she'ld manage to keep him somehow. . . . But she must be very careful. She was aware that, behind her pretence of affection, Moireen disliked her, and resented her interference with the child. Moireen might refuse out of sheer spitefulness. . . .

She reached the little house about tea-time. She felt physically tired by the journey, but her exaltation still upheld her.

Moireen wasn't alone. A well-dressed, middle-aged man of the man-about-town type was having tea with

her. Moireen was obviously at great pains to attract him, and he gave the impression of appraising her critically. He was very unlike the butterfly youths whom Naomi generally met in Moireen's drawing-room.

"Bobby?" said Moireen in answer to Naomi's quick enquiry. "Oh, yes, he's all right. He's out just now. He whines a lot, but I suppose all babies do."

The man took his departure, and at once Moireen's poise dropped from her. She was frightened and dejected—a butterfly with bedraggled wings. Naomi had never seen her like that before.

She enquired perfunctorily after Naomi's health, then burst into a dreary recital of her grievances. The sum total of them was that she hadn't any money, and didn't know where to turn for any. She answered Naomi's questions impatiently. No, she'd never known how much there was. She'd just gone on spending. . . . Well, it wasn't her fault that things cost such a lot of money. Roddy's pension? Of *course* she couldn't live on Roddy's pension. She *must* have nice things. She'd written to Roddy's uncle, and he'd refused to allow her anything more.

"You'll have to marry again," said Naomi callously.

It was quite evident from Moireen's expression that this was the course she was considering. But her dejection did not lighten.

"Men don't want to take on another man's child," she said sullenly. "They often don't want children of their own nowadays, so they aren't likely to want anyone else's. It's been terribly hard on me having Bobby. He's a constant expense. . . ." And then a crafty look came into her eyes, and she said gently, "You've got a nursery and a nurse, now, of course, Naomi, haven't you?"

Naomi's heart leapt. Her enemy was delivering herself into her hands. But still she must be very careful.

"Why, yes, of course," she said casually, as if she didn't see where Moireen's question tended.

"One more or less doesn't make a *lot* of difference when you've got a nursery, does it?"

Naomi smiled.

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said.

She saw Moireen stiffen to the fight.

"It *can't*, Naomi," she said. "If you're running the house for two babies, you might as well run it for three."

"What do you mean by that?" said Naomi. "Do you want me to take Bobby?"

"I don't see why you shouldn't," said Moireen sullenly. "You see how it is with me. After all, Roddy was just the same as your brother."

Naomi pretended to consider the matter doubtfully. Then she shook her head. She felt surprised at her own cunning.

"I'm afraid it's impossible. You see, if I took Bobby at all I should want to adopt him legally and, of course, you wouldn't want that."

Moireen started forward eagerly.

"But I should. I shouldn't mind at all, Naomi. I'm too young to be saddled with a child like this. . . . It's not been fair on me. It doesn't give me a chance. . . ."

"Very well," said Naomi. She still daren't show her gladness and relief. "Very well. I'll take him on those terms."

"Oh, thank you, darling," said Moireen, her dejection vanishing, her butterfly poise returning. "That's simply *too* sweet of you. I *adore* Bobby, and if it weren't that it's the best thing possible for *him* I shouldn't dream

of giving him up. Of course it *will* leave me freer, and you'ld hardly believe the money I had to spend on him. It's different for you. Humphrey's well off."

Humphrey was not as well off as he had been. The war had hit his business rather hard, and old Masters, who had been an excellent servant under orders, was proving an inefficient head. However, Humphrey was still rich enough, and, even if he hadn't been, Naomi would still have taken Bobby.

Moireen was surprised but rather relieved that Naomi insisted on taking the child back with her at once.

"I don't know about his things," she said doubtfully; "perhaps his nurse can get him ready."

Moireen always referred to the slovenly child as his "nurse." It seemed to confer on her an efficiency that otherwise she lacked.

Naomi thought of Bobby's "things"—those badly washed little articles that carried with them always a faintly sour smell.

"I'll take him as he is," she said. "I don't want his things."

She refused even the company of the "nurse" on her homeward journey.

"I don't think you *ought* to, Naomi," said Moireen, looking at Naomi's flushed cheeks and feverish eyes. But she was obviously glad to be rid of both of them, and she stood at the door waving gaily as the taxi drove off—Bobby wrapped in the grimy shawl that invariably accompanied him. He had been wailing fretfully when Naomi took him, but he had stopped as soon as he felt her arms around him, and he slept peacefully on the train journey. Once or twice he wakened and stretched his little arms about her generous bosom. The mere warmth and bigness of her seemed to give him comfort. He pressed his tiny frame against her as if to assure himself

that he was really there. He had always associated her with comfort and affection—things of which, apart from her, his little life had been pitifully empty.

§

Naomi's nurse, who had known nothing of her journey's object, was amazed when Naomi put the child into her arms.

"He's Mrs. Godstone's child," she explained. "I'm adopting him."

The joy of having the child under her own roof made her feel more light-hearted than she had felt for months. She looked like a great girl as she stood there, flushed and smiling.

"It's all right, nurse," she said, laughing. "Don't look like that. I can help now. I'm going to look after them all when you go."

The nurse, despite her disapproval of Naomi, adored babies. Already she had Bobby on her knee, and was examining him.

"Poor little mite!" she said. "They've let him get sore. We'll soon have that right. *And* a bit more flesh on his poor little bones."

He lay cooing weakly but happily on her lap, as if he knew that the worst of his troubles were over.

Freed now from her nightmare anxiety about Bobby, from the horrible shadow of a trust from Roddy unfulfilled, Naomi could turn at last to her own children. It was as if she saw them for the first time. They lay side by side in their trimmed cots, and gazed at her with serene blue eyes.

She flung her hat upon the floor and took them up, holding them tightly to her deep full bosom, one in each

crooked arm. The exuberance and vitality of her being seemed to flow out over them in a rich stream.

She had forgotten even Bobby.

"My babies!" she crooned. "My beautifuls!"

NAOMI GODSTONE CHAPTER XXXV

"Try again, Biddy," said Naomi. "Try again, darling. Just one more try. . . . You'll have sixpence if you do it just once now."

Biddy looked with a watery smile from the pile of pennies by her side to the bowl of steaming water. Every time she put the whole of her hand into the water and touched the bottom of the bowl, Naomi added another halfpenny to the pile. The doctor had said that the hand must be bathed in very hot water. Biddy was afraid of pain, and this was the only way they could coax her to put her poor hurt fingers into the hot water. If it had been Ruthie, of course, it would have been quite different. Ruthie would have put her fingers into the hot water however much it hurt, and held them there as long as she was told to. Ruthie was slow and earnest and solemn, but she had a pluck and endurance that were amazing. She adored Biddy with a curious mixture of motherliness and admiration. Biddy was so much quicker and brighter and prettier and more attractive in every way. She could learn anything in less than half the time that Ruthie took to learn it. She had the blue eyes and golden hair of a fairy-tale princess (Ruthie's eyes were grey, her hair that in-between colour that is neither dark nor fair), her bright imagination could weave delicious fancies over everything and everyone around

her, and in movement she was as quick and graceful as Ruthie was slow and deliberate.

Yet for all her glancing charm and lightness, she lacked something solid and dependable that Ruthie had, and she turned to Ruthie for comfort and protection in every crisis.

§

Ruthie stood by her now, her small face set and anguished in sympathy. She felt Biddy's pain far more acutely than if she had had the actual physical sting of it.

Bobby, on the other hand, standing on the bottom rung of Biddy's chair, making spasmodic attempts to balance on it without holding on to the back, was full of easy encouragement.

"Good old girl! That's right. Isn't she brave? Isn't she brave, mother?"

Bobby had had his seventh birthday last week and was going to his prep. school in September. He was anxious to drop as many childish habits as possible now, and, whenever he remembered, called Naomi "mother" instead of the old "mummy." He had Roddy's dark, deep-set eyes, but the flashing sweetness of his smile reminded you of Moireen.

It had been Naomi's idea to come for this holiday to the farm on the Yorkshire moors that had belonged to Humphrey's father and cousin. It had passed out of that family now, but the farmer who lived there had been glad to let rooms to them, and Aunt Rachel still lived in her little whitewashed cottage near the farm.

They had all enjoyed the holiday so much that, when the time had come for Humphrey to go back to work, they had decided that he should return alone, leave them

there, and join them for their week-ends till the time came for Bobby to go to school.

§

The accident to Biddy's hand had happened last week while Humphrey was away. Biddy had got up early, dressed herself, and trotted down to the farm kitchen where a servant was mangling some clothes she had just washed. The servant had not seen Biddy come into the room. A piece of bright red material was just disappearing into the mangle. Biddy ran to it to pull it out, and her tiny hand was caught and crushed by the rollers.

Her screams brought Naomi down in her nightdress. The maid was helpless with terror, and Biddy stood, her face milk white, her blue eyes frenzied, uttering scream after scream, holding up the crushed hand from which blood dropped on to her clean white frock. The nearest doctor lived five miles away and by the time he arrived Naomi herself had bathed and bandaged the little fingers. Humphrey had come the next day to spend the week-end with them, but she had no time or thought to spare for him. She had been wholly wrapped up in the little sufferer.

Once the first shock of pain and terror was over, Biddy was beginning rather to enjoy her new position of importance in the household. She and Ruthie had always been strong and healthy. The rôle of invalid was a novel one. It had always belonged to Bobby before, though Bobby was now outgrowing his delicacy.

Humphrey had watched his wife with rather a curious expression in his eyes during the week-end. It didn't puzzle her, because she hadn't time to notice it, but when

he was going she said to him with something of compunction in her voice :

" I'm sorry that I've seen so little of you, Humphrey. It will be better next week-end."

And he had looked at her and said in his slow, fumbling way, as if searching for words :

" I—didn't know you felt like that about Biddy, Naomi."

" Why not ? " she said in surprise.

" I knew you loved her, but "—his eyes looked at her, through her, seeing her again hovering in passionate love and pity over the little sufferer—" I thought that you—only felt—just like that—about Bobby."

Then the train had come in and he had gone before she had recovered from the surprise of his words.

§

She knew what he meant, of course. Bobby . . . Roddy's child. . . . His words had startled her, and all that week she had been thinking of them. Humphrey had treated Bobby always as if he were his own son. She hadn't known that he'd imagined Roddy's child to be nearer her than his children. It sent her thoughts back over the years to that day when she'd brought Bobby, wrapped in the grimy shawl, to the sweetness and brightness of her own nursery.

They had been years of hard work. At the end of the war Humphrey had come back to find his business almost completely ruined by mismanagement. The Towers was sold to a boys' school company for less than half it had cost to build. They managed to keep the Hall, but it meant unceasing hard work for Naomi—three babies to look after and most of the housework on her hands. There had been Imogen to care for, too—

Imogen, who moved about the old house, frail, happy, forgetting everyone but Naomi, following Naomi always with loving eyes. Naomi's life had been the richer for this late love of Imogen's. . . .

Imogen had died in her sleep two years ago, and at first Naomi had missed her unbearably. But she was so busy that she had no time for grieving. Work had never been a hardship to Naomi. It had been rather a vital need of her being. Her days were so full of work, her nights of the deep slumber of physical exhaustion, that the years had passed by, as it were, without her noticing them. . . .

It was Humphrey's words that had made her pause. "I didn't know you felt just like that about Biddy."

It was the first time that Humphrey had referred even indirectly to her love for Roddy since she had confessed it to him. She expected the words to open again the old wound, send that sharp stab of pain through her heart that any reference to Roddy once had power to send. But it didn't. . . . Gradually and without her realising it, the years had brought healing and forgetfulness. Passion had torn her, but she was of sterner stuff than could be destroyed by passion. The part of her life that she had buried in her love for Roddy, had died with him, but from it—unsuspected, unseen—a new life had been growing up, a life that was fuller, richer than the life she had given to Roddy, a love that was fuller, richer (because her nature was fuller and richer) than the love she had given to Roddy.

§

There probably wasn't any definite moment when she'd begun to love Humphrey. The growth had been as slow, as imperceptible, as such growths usually are. It had

been born of a mutual respect, a common sharing of joys and sorrows for many years. And, of course, she had learnt to love him in his children. The slowness and deliberateness that she loved so in Ruthie, couldn't irritate her any longer in him. The strange thing was that she hadn't realised her love for him till now . . . till his words had pulled her up to take stock of her life, had showed her that he took for granted that she was still at heart indifferent to him, that Roddy was still the only love of her life.

And so—for the first time in her busy life of the past years she seemed to stand aside, to look at herself, at Humphrey, at Roddy and her love for Roddy. It wasn't a case of looking back at her love for Roddy. It didn't belong to the past. Nothing belongs to the past. Whatever has happened to us is here with us now, drawn into the living essence of our being. But as a healthy body absorbs into its tissues the good part of what passes into it and expels the bad, so does a healthy soul.

Naomi didn't want to disown her love for Roddy. It had gone to the making of her. It was woven into the texture of her. It enriched her inner life just as Bobby, Roddy's heritage whom she loved as her own son, enriched her outer life.

§

Laying out the bandages and ointment ready for Biddy's hand, she watched the three children at the other end of the table. Bobby was a handsome, affectionate, happy-natured little fellow. He had inherited Moireen's serenity without her shallowness. He had artist's hands like Roddy's, and already a quick, deft way with a pencil.

Ruthie was extraordinarily like Humphrey, not only

in appearance but in her ways, in her unhasty deliberateness of speech and action, her slow-wittedness, combined with a tenacious determination to master a thing however long it took her, her stark simplicity of mind, and her humility. Biddy was a darling little romantic, who lived in her fairy-tales, to whom wizards and witches and princesses under spells were far more real than the world around her. Humphrey's mother had been like that . . . Humphrey's mother whose fairy castles lived still in the twisted turrets and gables of The Towers.

The water was tepid now and Biddy was only playing, enjoying her position as heroine of the occasion.

"Now I'll bandage it," said Naomi.

They clustered round her.

"It's ever so much better," said Naomi. "Daddy *will* be pleased."

"But it's not *well*," protested Biddy. She didn't want to lose her prestige.

Naomi laughed and kissed the fair, silky head.

Ruthie was watching the operation with tense interest, ready to feel more acutely than Biddy herself any pain the bandaging should cause her. Bobby stood on the rung of Naomi's chair just behind her, his arm round her, nuzzling in her neck like a puppy. . . .

Naomi was rather a martinet with her children, and they feared her anger. Though quick and hot, however, it was soon over, and the warm, rich motherliness of her was there always behind it.

§

She glanced at her watch. Humphrey's train would be in now. He walked from the station if it was fine, and they generally went to meet him.

"I'm going to meet daddy," she said. "Who'll come with me?"

They all clamoured to come. If Biddy came, she must walk quietly and keep her arm in a sling. . . . Very well, they could all come. . . .

She watched them as they got ready. There was nothing of her in any of them. Perhaps she would be in the third child, the child she carried now in her womb. Humphrey didn't know about it. She hadn't been sure herself, till this last week. So anxious and occupied had she been with Biddy's hand, that she had hardly had time to realise what the news meant. Now that her anxiety about Biddy was over and the hand was healing, her thoughts went to it. Humphrey would be glad. He wanted another child. He loved Bobby, but he wanted a son of his own. His own and Naomi's. The years had been so hard, the prospects of his business so precarious, that it had been as much as they could do to support the three children. But now things were easier. His business was increasing again rapidly. And he wanted a son. . . .

"Mummy, we're ready. Come along!"

But the postman had just arrived with a letter from Vivienne, and Naomi had to stop a minute to read it.

§

After the war Vivienne had engaged a hall and made her appearance as a *diseuse*. Naomi had gone to hear her on her first night. She had recognised many of the characters; Lily had been among them, and Cissie Clements of the Commercial College, the little film beauty and one or two types of "freshers" and College dons. It had been an almost unprecedented success. London

went mad over it. Every seat at the performances was booked up for months ahead; magnificent offers came from America, and then—just when Vivienne seemed to have the world at her feet, she threw everything up to marry her Scotch doctor. He had been in love with her since he had first met her among the Blue Birds at The Towers, but had not dared to propose till Vivienne, in love with him and wearying of the delay, gave him a gentle but quite unmistakable hint.

She was fond of telling people that it had taken her three years to get up her courage to propose to him.

She was indignant whenever it was suggested that her talents were wasted.

"Wasted? If you saw the babies' faces when I'm being the grandmother in Red Riding Hood, you wouldn't say that."

The letter was full of local news told in Vivienne's inimitable fashion, and ended: "By the way, I met someone the other day who knew our friend Elsie-Moireen in India. She said how charming she was!!"

§

Naomi thought of Moireen with a crooked smile as she put the letter back into its envelope. She had never heard from Moireen. Having deposited her egg in Naomi's nest cuckoo-wise, she had flown happily away. She had married an officer a year later, and had had a fashionable wedding at St. Margaret's, Westminster, to which Naomi had not been invited. She heard indirectly that Moireen was living the butterfly life she loved in India, and that she didn't look a day over twenty. Moireen, of course, had probably managed to persuade herself by now that she'd never had a child. Naomi was

glad to let her go. She had Bobby and the memory of Roddy in her heart.

"Yes, I'm coming," she said, slipping the letter into her pocket.

§

They went out into the sunny wind-swept moor. Bobby ran on in front, burrowing in ditches and walls and brushwood, bringing back any "finds" he discovered for her inspection. Biddy, forbidden to run because of her hand, walked with Ruthie, their arms around each other, the two heads close together.

"And he knocked at the door and a witch came out and then . . ."

Biddy was telling Ruthie a fairy-tale, making it up as she went along. . . .

Naomi quickened her steps. Suddenly the time before she should see Humphrey and tell him, seemed unbearably long. She yearned for the sight of his tall heavy figure, for the gentle kindly scrutiny of his grey eyes. . . . A deep happiness surged over her. . . . Love born of knowledge. . . . He had lost the first passion that her glowing beauty had roused in him and had learnt to love her—as she realised now that she loved him—with a love that would last as long as life lasted because it was mingled with the very springs of life.

They had reached the white cottage where Aunt Rachel lived.

"Let's stop and ask auntie if she'ld like to come and meet daddy with us," she said.

The door was open, showing the bare, scrubbed cleanliness and sweetness of the little front room with its stone flags and spotless hearth. It stood to Naomi for that clean

austerity without which all the sweetness of life is rotten at its heart. The children were already calling up the steep wooden stairs :

" Auntie Rachel, are you there ? Come and meet daddy with us. . . . *Do* come."

The sweet, thin old voice :

" I'll come, lovies. I'll just put on my bonnet."

She joined them almost at once. She looked very small and frail in the old-fashioned cape and bonnet. The blue eyes in the rosy, wrinkled cheeks seemed lit up with an inner glory of peace and happiness.

She began to walk along the moorland track with Naomi. Bobby ran on in front again, and the two little girls fell behind and continued the fairy-tale.

§

" Are you sure we haven't disturbed you ? " said Naomi. " Did you want to come out ? "

" I wanted to come," said the old woman. " It's too grand a day to stay in. Is the bairn better ? "

" Yes. It'll soon have healed now."

They walked on in silence, a quiet, peaceful understanding between them. This sudden discovery of her love for Humphrey and the knowledge that she was to have another child, filled Naomi with an excitement that almost brought back her girlhood. It was as if she'd climbed a hill in the shadows, her eyes on the ground, and on reaching the summit had raised them to find before her a new world bathed in a golden glow of sunshine . . . it was like that moment of her childhood when you came out of the yew tunnel into the sunshine at the Vicarage porch.

Bobby came running back with a foxglove that he had

found in a little hollow. The flowers had dropped, leaving the seed-pods.

"Let's take them home and plant them," he called. "You hold it, mummy . . ." and he had run off again. He wanted to be the first to see Humphrey.

Naomi looked at the stalk with its clustered seed-pods. Then she took one off, broke it and scattered it. Millions of tiny seeds as small as dust, uncountable. . . . "And more than thirty of them," said Naomi, counting the pods. "Isn't it amazing? One foxglove to fill a world almost. Nothing left to chance. Hundreds might blow on to stones or into ponds or die and still there'd be hundreds and thousands left to grow into flowers next year. We'ld have given each flower one seed or two—or ten at the most. We're so niggardly. Nature's so magnificently generous."

"It's God's way," said the little old woman in her gentle, far-away voice. "He doesn't leave things to chance. If we miss a hundred chances He'll still give us another. People talk of a second chance, but God gives a second thousandth chance. You can't go so wrong that He can't give you a chance of getting right again. It's a golden harvest He gives our poor sowings."

"I know," said Naomi. She was thinking of the wilful wrongness of her marriage, and how it had been miraculously put right. It couldn't have been put right in just that way, of course, if Humphrey hadn't been Humphrey, but somehow good would have come from it. Her heart was filled with an uplifting sense of confidence and joy.

"I can see daddy," called Bobby, and went leaping over the heathery tussocks. The two little girls ran after him as fast as they could run. . . . Humphrey's big unwieldy figure appeared, the children clinging to him.

Aunt Rachel stood still waiting, but Naomi went forward to meet him.

He came slowly towards her, his eyes seeking hers over the children's heads.

She felt like a young girl going to meet her lover.

THE END

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